

# THE THIRD WARNING

AUGUSTUS MUIR









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A ROMANCE OF HIGH HAZARD

BY

AUGUSTUS MUIR

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TO  
HAROLD FORRESTER

DEAR HAROLD,

*Because you love a mystery and a thrill and a spice of love in a book ; because your tastes range widely from Boswell to Baudelaire, from the highest of human productions, like the Odyssey, to the humblest of shockers, like the present yarn ; but most of all because you undoubtedly bullied me into writing this book, I place your name with mine.*

Yours,  
AUGUSTUS MUIR



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# THE THIRD WARNING

## CHAPTER I

### THE NEW LAIRD OF BRACKENBRIDGE

“COME this way,” said the boy and ushered me into the presence of Mr. Monks, the solicitor. “Good morning, Drysdale,” said Mr. Monks; “I was just about to write you.”

“You were, sir?” I exclaimed, smiling. “That’s bad. I’m very sorry.”

When Mr. Monks wrote to me, his letters were generally a trifle unpleasant, in that they touched with rather too firm a hand on the subject of money. As my trustee, Mr. Monks had the task of keeping a shrewd eye on me and of disbursing, in rigid quarterly doses, some three hundred per annum.

“Well, sir,” I continued, “as a matter of fact, it *was* about money I’ve come to see you. Money, as usual. I know I’ve been a bit of a nuisance, always wanting a whack from my quarter’s allowance in advance.”

“You have,” admitted Mr. Monks, smiling. “But I suppose it’s part of a trustee’s job to be worried to death by the young person whose finances he’s supposed to look after. And how much do you want this time?”

“Twenty pounds,” I pleaded. “And if you won’t run to that make it a tenner. Dash it all, sir, a tenner won’t make much difference either way. My next lot is due from you in six weeks. Can’t you manage me a tenner?”

"H'm," said Mr. Monks.

"I haven't been overdrawn at the bank since——"

"January," said Mr. Monks.

"A potty few pounds," I reminded him.

Mr. Monks smiled again, and looked out into the shady courtyard of the Temple.

"And it's never been worse than twenty pounds overdrawn," I added. "Which is quite good."

"And which I had to pay." Mr. Monks nodded meaningly.

"Out of my next quarter's whack!" I insisted. "I'm not grousing, sir. I think you've been dashed decent too. But the motor trade's rotten just now. Haven't sold three cars in a fortnight." I hesitated. "George Collier has got a month's leave from the Home Office and is going to Scotland fishing."

"Ah!" cried Mr. Monks, comprehending. "And ten or twenty pounds more would enable you to go fishing with him?"

"That—er—was the idea," I admitted.

"And has your motor firm in Piccadilly got so many other smart young assistants that they can afford to do without you for a month?"

"Oh, I don't make much difference to them," I muttered. "I don't know why I took up the job anyway. I suppose I know all about cars, and—sort of drifted into it."

"So I gathered at the time. Pity you couldn't have stayed on in the Army."

"Wouldn't have me," I said disgustedly.

"What, a major—a very young one, certainly—with a D.S.O. Why wouldn't they?"

"Wasn't through Sandhurst, and all that. I've a dashed good mind to blaze out to the Colonies. What do you think of the Mounted Police?"

Mr. Monks shook his head. "Waste of time and talents

for you. So is selling motor cars, for that matter. But what else is there? You're a good shot, can sail a boat, drive a motor car, and play, I believe, a wonderful game of Rugby. But there, I think, your accomplishments stop."

"That's about it," I agreed hopelessly. "I'd like to explore, but a man can't be an explorer on three hundred a year."

"I didn't know there was much of the globe left to explore," said Mr. Monks. "No; you'd better go off fishing to Scotland."

"What, sir? You mean you're going to cough out a tenner in advance! Bravo!"

Mr. Monks leant forward over his desk.

"A hundred if you like." Mr. Monks stared at me, unwinking.

"A—what?" I jumped to my feet: had old Monks gone mad? "But—but that's more than a quarter's allowance, sir!"

"Sit down, sit down," said Mr. Monks. "I have said I was about to write to you. This time my letter would not have been unpleasant. It would indeed have sounded singularly pleasant! In fact, I congratulate you."

"What is it?" I cried excitedly. "What's happened?"

"Just this. I will cut it short. Drysdale, I was as startled as you are. I may as well put all the facts before you at once. Don't imagine you are suddenly a millionaire, or any romantic nonsense of that sort. You have come into possession of a house and a little bit of land in Scotland. In fact, I believe you're entitled to call yourself a Scotch laird—Laird of Brackenbridge."

I gasped. "Good heavens, you mean some lunatic has left me some property?"

As Mr. Monks opened his mouth to speak, an old memory stirred in my mind, and I interrupted him excitedly: "Did you say Brackenbridge? Brackenbridge in Berwick-

shire? An uncle or something of my father lived there. Do you mean this old boy has left me a bit of land?"

"On the contrary. It was left to somebody else altogether. But law is law. The previous owner, by his father's will, had no power to dispose of it while any male heir was alive; and I have a letter from Blair & Ballantyne, the Edinburgh solicitors, telling me you are the nearest—in fact the only—male heir. There is no money, Mr. Blair tells me, except an annual rent roll of about seven hundred pounds."

"But you say it was left to somebody else?"

"Yes. The previous laird, who died but a few days ago, left everything to his greatest friend, the clergyman in the village, a Reverend Duncan Shaw. But that was before your existence was known of. You've upset everything. And Mr. Blair only discovered there was such a person as you the day before yesterday. Clever fellow, Blair."

"But what does this parson say about it?" I inquired. "Pretty hard luck, isn't it, my rolling up?"

"Tut-tut, how can it be hard luck when it's the law. Everything's yours, lock, stock, barrel. I congratulate you." Mr. Monks bobbed and smiled. "Seven hundred a year. Very useful. And Mr. Blair says in his letter he already has an offer of two hundred a year for Brackenbridge Hall—a very good offer, he says, which I think you should accept. Drysdale, you're a lucky rascal. I hope this extra thousand or so a year doesn't make you lazy—I mean, lazier than you are. Why, I was hoping you'd emigrate to the Colonies and make good."

"But, look here," I protested; "only ten minutes ago you said it'd be a waste of talent."

"My dear chap," chuckled Mr. Monks, "haven't you observed by this time it's the first duty of a trustee, solicitor, and general overseer, to dissuade his impulsive



young ward or client from doing absolutely everything he wants to do? By gad, sir, it's almost part of our professional etiquette! As your trustee, I recommend you to accept this offer for a lease of the Hall. As a friend," he rubbed his chin, "I think you'd better go and have a good look at the place yourself. The whole estate may be going to rack and ruin—may want building up, pulling together. That's a better occupation than lubbering about London blowing in your income on nonsense, which is just about what would happen."

"By jove, sir, you're right!" I exclaimed. "That was my first idea too—having a squint at the place myself."

"Well, here's Mr. Blair's address in Edinburgh. If you're going north at all, go to him first. I'll drop a line warning him. Now I've another client waiting. Good-bye, Drysdale, and good luck!" And thudding me genially on the back, he pushed me to the door. As he shot me out, he whispered, "I'll post your bank a hundred to-night."

The first thing I did on reaching the street was to sprint into a 'phone box and ring up old George at the Home Office. I was almost dithering with excitement. Life to me had been rather colourless since the war, but now it took on a braver hue. Selling motor cars to disgruntled plutocrats in a Piccadilly showroom may suit some people, but a Scotch hillside is more to my liking. I jiggled the telephone with a pleasant burst of impatience, and George's cheery voice came over the wire.

"George," I cried, "George, old thing, I'm buzzing straight along to your flat now. How long will you be before you tear yourself away from that frowsy office?"

"What's the fuss?" said George, tersely. Like all budding politicians, George is usually garrulous: it's only later they learn to leave the garrulity to the other man.

"Got great news," I shouted.

"I'll come right away," said George. "For the rest of the afternoon I'll leave Britain's prestige to other, though less capable, hands. Chin-chin. Will see you shortly."

When I arrived George was there waiting for me. "Drink this. It'll steady your nerves. You're looking uncommonly wild about the eyes. Ronny, old son, what's happened? Have you actually sold a car to somebody, or what?"

"George," I cried, "I'm coming to fish with you in Scotland after all."

"What the deuce d'you mean?" demanded George. "Have you backed a winner, or has that trustee johnnie gone soft in the brain and given you all your patrimony in your little hot hand?" He tapped my breast pocket and pretended to listen for the crackle of bank notes.

"Neither! George; old thing, you see before you Ronald Drysdale, Laird of Brackenbridge. I am the pot-bellied squire, my dear man, of an estate in the Lammermuir Hills, a bit on this side of Edinburgh."

"Good Lord," said George. "You're a cheery, beery laird? Now who has done that to you? I don't even know whether I should associate with you any more. They've a bad name, Scotch lairds. Awfu' lads for the drink and the lasses, I'm told. By gad, old thing, you'll have to sprout a beard and buy a fob. But what are you going to do about it all?"

"Firstly," I said, "we're going to celebrate the event to-night with a dinner. Such a slap-up dinner you won't know yourself. Then to-morrow we set out——"

"Day after," objected George. "Make it the day after, and we'll go in my two-seater; she'll be ready by then. Besides, there's Britain's prestige, etc., to look after all to-morrow. And here, I say, give me time to buy a kilt. As the intimate friend of a laird, I daren't

appear in flannel bags—they'd shoot me at sight in Balna—what d'you call it ? ”

“ Brackenbridge, you ass. Brackenbridge Hall.”

“ Phew ! A Hall, is there ? Sounds as though you were lord of creation. Never mind, we'll train the oldest inhabitant to touch his sporran to you, so that's all right. Hullo, where away ? ”

“ To Piccadilly. To chuck up my job with the motor people.”

“ Wait ! ” warned George, in mock-earnest. “ You might sell a few cars to your villagers.”

“ And to buy a couple of guns and some fishing tackle,” I added.

“ Huh ! ” sighed George. “ Quite the country gentleman already. Order me a couple of hunters when you pass Tattersalls—we'll take 'em north in the dicky seat. Toodle-oo.”

“ Till eight o'clock,” I cried ; “ the Carlton grill.”

“ I'm peckish already,” chuckled George, salaaming.

“ Guid e'en to ye, Laird, guid e'en ! ”

## CHAPTER II

### THE LIGHT IN THE LIBRARY

I HAVE always been a simple-minded sort of beggar as far as pleasures go, and as a youngster I used to think there was nothing in the world like the quiet thrill I got from opening the parcel containing a new toy. This was exactly the thrill I felt as I journeyed north with George; and it was my impatience to see the place that led to our decision to make the village of Brackenbridge our caravanserai for the night. I would have my first look at my new house; then we would go on to Edinburgh in the morning. I need not say that the nearer we got, the more excited I became.

"Slow up, George," I said, digging him with my elbow. "We turn along the next opening on the right."

"Better have the lights on," grunted George, pressing the switch on the dashboard, "or we'll miss it altogether. By jove, it's been a day! We've done," he glanced at the speedometer, "just on three-fifty miles since brekker. We'd have been there long ago if you hadn't wasted time with your snooze after lunch."

"You snoozed yourself," I growled. "In fact, I woke you up first. Here we are: take it gently. Brackenbridge seven miles. Leave the sign-post standing, you road-hog."

"Your ancestors picked a hilly spot for their estate!" muttered George, dropping into second gear. "Probably they found they could dodge the police of those days better among the hills. What fun it must be to have a cattle-thief as a great-great-grandfather."

We roared in George's powerful two-seater along the winding road, through dense pine woods and over old grey bridges that spanned clattering rivers, up into the Lammermuir Hills. If it hadn't been for an occasional hut, or cluster of cottages, I'd have thought it all as lonely as a desert. When a lighted train tore past across the glen I could have jumped up and shouted. But the splendid loneliness did not damp my interest in my new possessions.

"Three hearty huzzas," said George; "I see a village." And a few minutes later we had swung into the twilight of a street, with low houses on either side, and an array of windows spouting yellow lamplight. "This looks like an inn," mumbled George. "Can you read the sign? 'Brackenbridge Arms.' Ronny, old son, we have arrived!"

A stout and cheerful dame met us in the little cramped hall with its hanging lamp. To our query whether she could put us up for the night, she smiled, nodded, and replied: "Aye. Manage fine." Her husband carted our luggage upstairs; and twenty minutes later we sat down in the coffee-room to a simple but voluminous supper.

"They do you well," chuckled George as he tackled a regular hayrick of cold beef. "Better tell 'em you're the new laird and they might throw in champagne if they've heard of the stuff."

"I somehow feel it's bad form," I said, "coming here before going on to see Mr. Blair in Edinburgh. But I'm dying to have a look at the outside of the Hall before it gets too dark. So hurry up with that pound or so of roast beef you're gormandizing."

Before setting out, we sampled the local whisky in the bar below; and I asked a stout fellow with corduroys in which direction Brackenbridge Hall lay. As I said the words, there was a clap of silence in the bar. Men took quick glances at us over their shoulders. The yokel looked at us queerly and jerked his head eastwards.

"We're unpopular all of a sudden," whispered George. "D'you spot it?" I was conscious of sundry pairs of eyes following us as we went out.

"It's only natural," I commented. "Old man Drysdale died just last week, and they probably think we're going to lease the place."

George nodded as we passed down the street in the dusk. "Might be a lot of obvious reasons," he agreed. "It struck me as rummy at the moment. These rustics didn't gape at us blatantly—they sort of squinted round corners. I know what it is!" he chuckled. "Their thrifty souls were scenting a new means of income. Three-pence a time to look at Brackenbridge Hall where the Old Man Died!"

I laughed, but at the back of my mind there was an element of doubt and even suspicion. Well, no matter, I concluded. It made my great adventure all the more interesting.

We had left the village behind.

"I say," said George, "how far are we supposed to go to get a squint at this family seat of yours?"

"We haven't passed lodge gates or anything," I meditated.

George snorted. "Lodge gates! Don't be such a snob. Perhaps your ancestors just shinned over the wall. What's that row going on?"

"Sounds like a lawn mower," I said. "Over that hedge. Somebody seems busy. Let's ask where the place is."

A few yards ahead was a little white gate, and up a long garden lay an old square house embowered in trees. I called out to the unseen mower of grass. The machine stopped. "Hallo, hallo!" a voice hailed us.

"Golly, it's a girl," whispered George.

And she was an amazingly attractive girl to boot, tall,



slender, with reddish hair and white teeth and a frank, jolly smile.

"I thought you weren't village people when I heard you call," she said, opening the gate. "In a little place like this one gets to know everybody so well."

"Yes, we just arrived this evening," I replied. "I wonder if you could kindly direct us to Brackenbridge Hall."

In the twilight I could see the smile going slowly from her face. "The Hall?" she repeated, in a slightly restrained voice. There was a moment's pause. She looked at George, then back at me. Again I had the queer feeling I had at the inn with the rustics.

"I don't believe there's any such place," chuckled George. "When we asked a lad in the village the way, he practically demanded to see our passports, to say nothing of a bank reference."

"You must excuse me," said the girl, smiling again. "I was taken aback for a moment. Of course there's such a place. If you look right past the Manse there, you can just see a little turret thing among the trees. No, perhaps it's too dark. Anyway, if you go right along this road about three hundred yards you'll come to the gates."

"Thank you very much," I replied. "We only wanted a passing look at it."

"It's all locked up, you know," she added.

"Oh, no matter. We'll just stroll along and back again. Good night."

The mower whirled again as we proceeded. "Your rascally forbears plumped for a spot where they grow pretty girls," remarked George. "Quite a rustic beauty."

"Not so rustic either," I said. "Did you spot, by the way, how she caught her breath when we asked for the Hall? And she spoke of her house as 'the Manse.' She

must be the daughter, or something, of the parson that old Drysdale left the whole outfit to in his will."

"I don't wonder she looked as if she wanted to run you under the mower blades," George murmured.

"She didn't, you chump. She doesn't know who I am from Adam. How could she? She was a bit startled, that's all. Hallo, that looks like the place."

"Ye old family mansion," intoned George, taking his hat off with a gesture. We looked through a gap in the trees; a portion of the house was just discernible in the gathering darkness; and we could see the queer little turrets and upper windows of a jutting gable. "A romantic moment," proceeded George. "Drink it all in, Ronny. Ye home of ye de-Drysdales. I say, look, old thing! I thought that girl said it was locked up."

"She did. By jove, that was a light, wasn't it? It's gone out now."

"There it's again!" cried George, gripping my arm. "Seems like somebody closing the curtains."

The place was black and dead once more. Looking at it, I could scarcely believe that my eyes had seen a shimmer of light in an upper window. "Can't have been a light, George. Couldn't it have caught a bit of sunset or something?"

"Sun's down," said George shortly. "Might be cleaners busy. But it's a queer time for cleaners to be messing about."

"I say, George, I'm going over this wall to have a look," I burst out impulsively. "After all, the dashed place is mine."

"Good wheeze," nodded George, to whom the unusual was meat and drink.

"I'd have put the lights down to some old housekeeper body," I continued, "but that girl said plainly the place is locked up. Living next door she ought to know."

"We'll have a squint and see," said George with a chuckle. "Wouldn't do, when you take possession, to find some pushful lad has abstracted all your furniture and disposed of it to the local pop shop."

Which is just the sort of thing George *would* say in the circumstances. He seemed to regard the affair with relish, as some huge joke. Personally, I felt quite a shiver up my spine as we pushed through these dense trees of fir and larch, and came out at last on a wide lawn, with a circular drive that curved in front of the house. We looked at it in silence for a second. I had an impression of a grey, irregular place, with huddled crow-step gables and turrets, very foreboding, I must say, in the darkness of that evening.

"I wouldn't live here for a fortune," I grunted.

"Looks spooky," assented George. "That's the window where the light was. There's nothing to be seen now."

"Yes, there is," I whispered excitedly. "Come over this way a bit. There's just the thinnest crack of light where the curtains join. George, somebody's in that house."

George moved to his right and craned his neck. "You're correct, old son. It *must* be some old housekeeper wench giving the place a dust down."

"Let's knock on the front door and find out," I suggested eagerly. "We may as well see through the house now that we're here. It's perhaps not etiquette for me to butt in before meeting old Blair in Edinburgh, but I'm dashed curious to know who's there. He can't have leased the house without my consent."

I moved across the lawn to the doorway.

"Hold a second," said George. "I vote we scout round the place first and see if there's any sign of life."

No pair of housebreakers ever circumnavigated a house

with greater stealth ; but we found nothing save silence and desolation. The windows were all shut and fastened ; the back door, when we tried it, was locked ; nor was there a hint of a fire in any room.

" Rummy," agreed George when I spoke my mind.

" Look here," I said deliberately, " I'm not going to knock. I'm going to get a window open somehow and jolly well stroll in. If the place is supposed to be locked up, it seems to me somebody is in there who's got no right to be. The place is mine, so I can't be clinked for busting into my own property to find out."

" I'm with you ! " George chuckled. " Why didn't you tell me there was going to be a bit of fun like this, you old owl ? I'd have packed my automatic in my kit, and fished along my old Somme knobkerrie as well. This is a stunt just after my own heart ! "

And I do honestly think it was. In two-twos he had his pocket-knife out and was prying at the catch of a window. I tiptoed back again to the spot on the lawn where we saw the faint crack of light. It still shone, a dim streak in the darkness.

" Got it open," whispered George. " Hop up beside me and push. Woa, there. Gently, old thing. If it creaks, we're done. Personally, I shouldn't be surprised after all if it's just some old Mother Mop-and-pail sampling the ancestral gin. But we'll soon see. Gently does it. There we are."

The window slid up ; I flung my leg over the sill, felt about in the darkness, and dropped on the floor ; George joined me.

" Better leave it open," suggested my companion, " in case we need to do a quick exit. I should hate some old Mother Swabs to crack me on the head with a gin bottle or hit me with a bucket."

Dust sheets were over everything ; they glimmered

greyly at us out of the blackness. We opened the door into the hall, and stood in silence listening.

A very faint murmur of voices reached us from above. There was more than one person : that was all we could glean standing there in the empty hall. The place was quite silent save for the jerky murmur that came from upstairs and the wind in the trees without.

High in front of us, against the coloured glow of a stained glass window, could be seen the outline of heavy banisters. "Come on," I whispered at last. "We'll go up there and see what's what."

There was a wide stone stair thickly carpeted. We reached the landing without a sound. The voices were now louder : two men, it seemed, were deep in some discussion. Along the passage a beckoning blotch of yellow light glinted on the wall.

"I'll go first," I told George, and I guided him towards the glow of illumination.

The door stood open about a couple of feet. We paused. One voice was slow and droning, the other quick and staccato. The staccato one seemed to be doing most of the talking.

I stepped forward and, from behind the door, took a survey.

The room was high, with an old-fashioned air, and heavy elaborate furniture. Great curtains screened the windows, and every portion of wall my eye included in that rapid glance seemed lined with bookshelves heavy with leather tomes. It looked an aged and a comfortable room. Near the immense fire-place a candle stood upon a chair. On another chair sat a man, with a squat head, but sandy-haired and genial of countenance. Through large glasses he peered at his companion, who stood beside him, a tall bronzed roughish fellow.

As I watched them, my ears grew accustomed to

their voices, so that I could distinguish what they said.

"We must get into this somehow." The sandy-haired one was speaking; it was he who had the jerky incisive tones. "There's something about it in here. I'll swear to that." Then I saw they were in front of a huge oak bureau, and the speaker was tapping the brown shining wood with nervous fingers.

"We could break it open," suggested the bearded man. "It's heavy stuff, but I dare say——"

"No," snapped the other. The sandy-haired man was clearly the leader in their project. "Not that! That Blair fellow from Edinburgh's got the eyes of a hawk. He mustn't think it's been tampered with. What happened to all the keys?"

"Blair took them yesterday—he took everything."

"The meddlesome fool! He may have taken . . . yes, we've been fools ourselves—we should have got in here before he took them." The fingers tapped again, a nervous, incessant tap that thudded softly through the dim room.

I think it was this tapping that woke me to action. By what right were they there? Why were they determined to get into that bureau? *My* bureau! At any rate, if they were enemies of Mr. Blair, the family lawyer, they were no friends of mine. A sudden flame of hot anger kindled within me. I stepped boldly into the room and, in a loud voice, called out, "What the blazes are you doing?"

A thunderbolt from heaven could not have had a more shattering effect. In a flash the sandy-haired man was on his feet, and at the same instant his hand closed over the candle flame. The room was instantly steeped in a dense and blinding darkness. That action, so slickly and guiltily performed, proved to me their purpose



was no honest one. There was a moment of sharp racking silence.

I took charge of the situation. "Come on," I shouted to George, and rushed forward. If two strapping fellows of our muscular capacity weren't the equal of these older men, I'd know the reason why.

"Tackle 'em low," growled George in business-like tones, and at my side charged across the room. I had marked the position of my man, he of the sandy hair and jerky voice, and I made for him with teeth clenched and every muscle ready.

My hands suddenly struck something hard and cold—the fire-place! I had missed him. I leapt backwards. And at that moment there was a gasp of escaping breath, as of an effort put quickly forth; and I found myself spinning to the hearthrug, dazed from a buffet on the head with a heavy object. A chair toppled over me.

For a moment I lay helpless. The suddenness of the blow rattled me, but I was more stunned than damaged.

"I've got him!" George's voice called out. There was a scuffle and a rattling thud on the floor. "Lie there, you blighter——"

But his words tailed off into a choking gasp. I threw off the chair that lay over me, and staggered to my feet. I was still dazed, but George's gasp of distress brought me to my senses with a jerk. I could hear a jumble of noises on the floor, bumps and blows and muffled exclamations.

I was about to throw myself forward into the *mêlée* in the darkness when it occurred to me I could handle the crisis better if I knew what had occurred. So I whipped out a box of matches.

The scratching of my vesta coincided with the sound of quick footsteps on the floor. The leaping flame disclosed George scrambling to his feet, his hands tugging at his collar, and his face blazing with wrath.

"I'll kill that swine," he snarled. "I had the big one down and nearly out, when that devil with the glasses got me by the gullet. Woof, I was nearly a goner! Come on, we'll smash 'em yet!"

The match flickered out as he spoke, and we made for the door. There was a clatter of retreating footsteps down the stairs and across the ringing tiles of the hall.

We plunged after the sounds; but by the time we had descended there was silence in the house again.

We paused. It was impossible to believe, as we stood there in the stillness, that a couple of minutes before we had been in a desperate scuffle with two unknown men. They had disappeared so suddenly and so completely that we might have dreamed the entire episode.

"Are they still in the house, do you think?" I asked George.

"Heaven knows. I shouldn't think so. At any rate, we'd be a couple of mugs if we tried to search for 'em. Whatever their game was, we've scared them off for the present. I vote we get back to the inn."

"Carried unanimously," I breathed, with fervency.

George, with his admirable pocket-knife, slipped home the catch of the window behind us, and shortly afterwards we were on the main road back to the village.

It was when we were passing the white gate of the Manse that we were pulled up sharp.

"Excuse me," said a voice. I recognized it as that of the girl to whom we had already spoken.

## CHAPTER III

### MARGET

THE girl pushed open the gate and stepped out beside us on the road.

"I was wondering if you found it all right." Her tone was casual, but displayed a certain friendly interest.

"Quite all right, thanks," I replied.

"Of course there's not much to see from the road, and you'd find the gates locked. The grounds used to be pretty."

"As a matter of fact we didn't go the length of the gates," I admitted. "We just strolled along the road a bit and—er—came back."

"I hope you won't think me inquisitive, but if I can be of any help I'll be glad. Dad was a great friend of poor old Mr. Drysdale, the previous owner, who died last week. If you were thinking of renting the place or anything, I could let you know where to get the key and that sort of thing."

I laughed.

"Thanks very much, but I wasn't thinking of taking it. As a matter of fact, my own name's Drysdale, and the place is apparently mine."

At this I observed the same queer little catch in the girl's breath that I had noticed before. "I thought possibly you might be," she said slowly. There was a pause. "In fact," she continued with a little laugh, "I meant to ask you straight out! It'll be so jolly having someone next door again—so good for Dad to have a

neighbour again. He's been dreadfully upset since Mr. Drysdale died. But, oh, I forgot—perhaps you won't come and live here at all. Were you thinking of letting it? You must pardon my neighbourly curiosity. But you'll notice I'm quite frank about it!" She laughed again—a laugh that was charming and musical and intimate.

"I had an open mind on the subject," I replied, "until to-night. Now I've quite determined what I'm going to do. I'm coming to live in the Hall myself." As I uttered the words, I think no one was more startled than I was. For, indeed, until I said so, I had determined on no such course.

One's mind sometimes plays one queer tricks. Mine did then; and it was not until I blurted out my decision that I realized I had been unconsciously turning the notion over at the back of my brain from the moment we had first spoken to this girl. The events at the Hall had capped it: my appetite for adventure—or my curiosity, call it what you will—was aroused: I was going to be my own tenant!

"You must come in and see Dad," said the girl at once. "He'll be delighted to meet you." I began to protest, pleading the lateness of the hour, but she refused to listen. George and I found ourselves wandering in the darkness up the garden path and into the hall, where a lamp glimmered. A few moments later we were ushered into the study. A white-haired, clean-shaven clergyman sat at a table, a reading-lamp concentrating its beams upon his books, the rest of the room in shadow.

He jumped up nervously as we entered the room. The girl explained who I was and departed.

"Ah, Mr. Drysdale!" he said, shaking hands warmly. "I'm delighted to meet you—and your friend. My name is Shaw. Sit down, please. You have lost no time in coming to look at your—er—your new place. Quite right, quite right."

"I'm on my way to see Mr. Blair in Edinburgh," I explained. "Mr. Collier and I have put up the night at the inn, as we may as well stop in Brackenbridge as anywhere else."

"Exactly," he nodded. "And how did my little girl come to find you out? Marget has a wonderful knack of making friends."

"We asked her the way." I fumbled with my cap.

He nodded again. "I'm glad you did. I'll admit I'm sorry for my little girl Marget. This place is too quiet for her, though she tries to keep bright, I know, for my sake. It will be much too dull of course for you here—you'll be leasing the Hall, I presume?"

"I'm not," I said. "I'm coming to live here as soon as I can fix it."

He started; he was visibly surprised, and took no pains to conceal it. His eyes fell, and he said nothing. He looked at me uncertainly once or twice, then leant suddenly forward, as if he had made up his mind. When he spoke his voice was deep and earnest:

"Don't do it, my young friend, don't do it!"

Then he dropped back into his chair, as if it had been an effort to speak. Clearly, he was highly wrought, and I noticed him cast an occasional glance over his shoulder as if to reassure himself we were alone in the room. One of the windows was open, and with a quick movement he crossed and closed it, though the night was warm. His hands, in the lamplight, were thin and nervous.

"Why, is there anything wrong with the place?" I inquired.

"I can't tell you," he replied slowly. "I know very little, and the little that I do know I wish I could forget. Dear old Mr. Drysdale was my greatest friend, and to him I was under a seal of secrecy. Now—he is dead; and I am under a double seal."

"Jolly interestin'," said George. "Sounds almost spooky."

Mr. Shaw's hands tightened nervously on the arms of his chair. "I don't know why I tell you this. It's just that—well, it's my duty, I suppose. My duty to warn you. You are a pleasant young fellow, Mr. Drysdale, and I don't want—I don't want harm to come to you." He again cast a quick glance over each shoulder, and leant forward to me. His voice dropped to a whisper. "I have a suspicion—forgive me: I know it sounds melodramatic—a suspicion that my old friend Drysdale did not die of natural causes. I tell you my thoughts, in strictest confidence, because you are his only relative. You must pardon my putting it all so bluntly."

I half rose from my chair. "Murdered, you mean?"

He shook his head. "I don't know! How can I tell? It's only a surmise. But I feel it's the truth—the dreadful truth. Of course I dare not say so. I have nothing to go on. It would only make things worse. The thing's done. I couldn't bear to have it all raked up."

"But who—who is responsible?" I insisted.

He shook his head again. "I don't know. If I did, what could I do?"

"You mean," I said, "it's something you can't touch—something supernatural?"

"No!" he rose to his feet and pointed out into the thick darkness. "It's man!—man, guileful, scheming, ruthless." He brought his hands slowly together, with fingers outstretched. "Like a net closing in!" His shoulders jerked in a sudden shiver. He turned from the black window. "But there, my young friend, you will be laughing at me for an old fool. Well, perhaps in some ways I am; perhaps I am. But take an old fool's advice—leave Brackenbridge Hall alone. Let the place, and go. I would go away too—if I could."



"But," I declared, "don't you see that what you've said only makes me the keener to come and live at the Hall—to get to the bottom of things?"

He covered his face with his hands. "Then would that I had held my peace!" It was obvious to me that the man's nerves were at the point of collapsing; that he needed a long rest.

"On the contrary, I greatly appreciate your confidences," I said. "You can trust my friend and me. I can only say how glad I am your daughter brought us in to see you. I felt a little awkward about it, as I know it was my relative's intention that his property should come to you as his best—perhaps his only—friend."

Mr. Shaw's face clouded. "I am very sorry you knew of that. I hope it will not cause you any feelings of constraint. Before he died I had no idea he had left everything to me, and I cannot tell you my relief when I heard there was an heir who would inherit. Money and possessions are nothing to me, my friend. I am delighted—delighted someone else will take over Brackenbridge. I am doubly delighted it is you."

As we shook hands on leaving, he looked into my eyes. "You won't forget what I have said? Think it over deeply."

I thanked him again, and we departed. On the road George stopped. "What's that?" he said quickly. Light footsteps were making up on us. I almost knew before she spoke it was the girl Marget. "Could I see Mr. Drysdale for a moment?" she asked, and George walked on alone.

"What has Daddy been telling you?" she said. "Has he told you not to come and live in the Hall?"

I admitted as much, wondering what the girl was leading up to.

"Well, there are queer things going on here; that's all

I know ; and I don't think Daddy knows much more. Mr. Drysdale, I do wish you'd take his advice."

She put her hand on my arm—I felt it rest there softly, and my own closed over it. Hers was warm, and it trembled slightly. We were so close I could feel her breath on my face. "Don't come back here again," she whispered, "never again."

The next moment she had called out a blithe good night and was running back to the Manse.

"What a rummy affair," I said to George. "Marget said——"

"Marget ? "

"That girl, you know."

"You've made rapid progress," said George.

"Shut up, you chump ! Her father called her that. Be serious for a second. She said I was to clear out—said if I valued my health I wasn't to live here."

George whistled. "She said that too, did she ? The parson struck me as slightly potty. As if the old laird's death had slightly touched his brain. But if the girl said that too . . . yes, either potty, or trying to scare you away. . . . On the other hand——" He fell silent, as if turning the whole evening's experience over in his mind.

"Do you know, Ronny," he said suddenly, "now I've time to think about it, I could swear there were three men—not two—in the fight in that room to-night."

"Three—in the library at the Hall ? "

"There was a third man," said George slowly, "that we never saw ! "

## CHAPTER IV

### I LEARN SOME HARD FACTS

NEXT morning was bright with sunshine. I heard George singing in his bath, which I thought very good-natured of him, since the bath was but a round zinc tub in which one could sit only by keeping one's legs wagging like damp flags in the air. At breakfast he was equally cheerful. The events of the previous evening seemed to have passed completely from his mind, and he talked merrily through the meal about the stuff he meant to purchase in Edinburgh, the fishing tackle and ammunition and other sporting adjuncts. But I had not his power of concentration on the needs of the moment. There were many things I also wanted to buy which I hadn't got in London, things I should certainly need if George and I carried out half the joyous jaunts we had planned ; but my mind kept running on the happenings of last night, happenings for which I tried vainly to find an explanation.

"Cheer up, you owl," said George, as we packed into the car. "Are you brooding on what the parson told you ?"

"The whole thing worries me," I said. "Not *worries* exactly. That's not the right word. But I'm hanged if I can make it out."

"That's where you make a mistake, my son," nodded George, shielding a match for my cigarette and lighting his own. "Your lawyer johnnie should put you wise to-day. Why brood any more about it, till you hear what he says ? When you've had a chat with him, the whole thing may be as plain as pie."

"These men in the library will take a lot of explaining," I growled.

"You're right. It's rummy. But you take my tip. While you see your lawyer wallah, I'll buzz along to the shops. We meet at lunch-time—one o'clock, Caledonian grill. You'll find the place easily."

The forty miles over the brown hills, and down through Midlothian, to the grey old city of Edinburgh, was soon accomplished. We parted on the wide boulevard of Princes Street, with its glowing gardens sweeping up to the castle rock on one side, and that dignified avenue of clubs and hotels and the glittering plate glass of lordly shops on the other; and I made my way to Castle Street and the offices of Blair & Ballantyne, solicitors, in an eager and expectant frame of mind.

Mr. Blair was a little man with a quick grey eye and a high, rusty intonation. You felt that if you only decked him out in a skull-cap and spectacles he would be a perfect character from a Dickens sketch. But there was nothing old-fashioned about him when he spoke.

"So you're young Mr. Drysdale?" he said, his fleet glance travelling over me in a frank assize. "Aye, imphem. Sit down."

"Ye haven't been long in coming," was his next remark. "I only got the letter from Mr. Monks this morning."

I acknowledged the remark. There was a pause.

"What's your hurry, Mr. Drysdale?" he added, almost as an afterthought.

I explained that my only hurry was mere interest in my new estate.

"Aye," said Mr. Blair. "Ye'll want to see it?"

"As a matter of fact," I began, and then stopped. I was about to say that we had broken our journey at Brackenbridge the night before, and I had had as good an inspection as the darkness would allow. But looking into

his suspicious grey eyes, and in face of his reticent manner, I decided to hold my peace meantime on that point. "As a matter of fact," I said, "I'd like to see it very much, as soon as you can arrange for me."

"Aye, imphem," said Mr. Blair.

"But before that," I continued, "I wish you'd give me some of the particulars."

"We're coming to that," said Mr. Blair. "We're coming to that! If ye've any idea that ye're a rich man, brush it from your mind. That is, Mr. Drysdale, unless ye're a rich man already."

"I'm not," I assured him. "I have three hundred a year private income, that's all."

"Ye're lucky," said Mr. Blair dryly. "There's a thousand odd acres all told of farm and moorland, which includes a few hundred acres up the hills, with some tumble-down buildings, I believe. When the interest on a small mortgage is covered, there's barely seven hundred pounds a year. And it's likely to be less in the near future. Also, there's the taxation, which is a bonny penny."

"Still," I said, "it's better than nothing."

Mr. Blair assented. "But there's that great barracks of a house on your hands. Ye'll never keep it up. The house and grounds, I believe, are going to rack and ruin, and there's only one solution for ye, Mr. Drysdale. I have here an offer from a party to rent it. Two hundred a year is the rent he offers. In my opinion he's a fool. You should take it."

"Two hundred a year isn't to be sneezed at," I agreed.

"Aye," cried Mr. Blair, "and your feet are clear! Rent the Hall, and ye've nine hundred a year in your hands to go where ye like with, and do what ye like with."

"How did my relative carry on?" I inquired.

Mr. Blair shook his head. "He didn't," he said shortly. "Old Mr. Drysdale—he was your father's cousin—didn't

live the life of a dog. This firm, ye'll understand, has acted for the family for near on seventy years. Ye'll not take it as personal, since ye're a distant relation, but ye've been the worst clients we've ever had dealings with. Stiff-necked and dour, the lot of ye. Go your own way, ye would, and faugh ! for your lawyer's advice. If ye read some of the letters from your dead relation that are filed in the cellars under this office, ye'd call us fools for not sending your family packing to seek another lawyer years ago. I trust you're not of the same kidney." He glared at me shrewdly.

" I think you'll find me amenable to reason," I laughed. " But tell me about old Mr. Drysdale."

" Andrew Drysdale," said Mr. Blair shortly—his manner and his matter were both short—" lived in Brackenbridge Hall for just on fifty years. He had been in the Army in his young days, but something came over him. He resigned and buried himself at Brackenbridge. Some say he had got into trouble, some say he was crossed in love ; I don't know ; but a sourer man ye never met. He sat in his library and read all day and half the night, and saw never a soul except the village minister. I believe the folk in the village thought him a bit queer in the head, but he wasn't that ! "

" How did he live ? " I inquired. " I mean servants and all that."

" There were none," replied Mr. Blair. " A farmer's wife came in and gave him his meals, I understood, and cleaned the house once in a while. No, I'm wrong ; it was the farmer's sister. Forsyth's a bachelor, and nearly as surly a character as the laird. As well as farming the Home Farm, this Forsyth is the factor, or agent as ye'd call it, of the estate. Factor after factor Andrew Drysdale had—none of them would stay with him, till he got this Forsyth fellow, who just went his own gait and paid no



attention, which I suppose was the only sensible thing to do."

"Is he still there, this man Forsyth?" I asked.

"Oh, yes. Ye'll find him a bullying character, but he seems honest enough. At least, his books are in spry enough condition. I've been through them over the valuation."

"Tell me," I said, "what sort of man is the village minister? I believe old Mr. Drysdale left him everything in his will."

"I know nothing about the man," answered Mr. Blair decisively. "I drew up the will according to Andrew Drysdale's instructions. He told us there was no heir, and no one knew of your existence. There was no use offering advice—we knew barely anything of our client's affairs. For all the good we were to him, as a firm, Andrew Drysdale need hardly have had a lawyer at all. But there—ye can't alter human nature."

"We seem to have been a queer lot, we Drysdales," I said smiling.

"You were," agreed Mr. Blair. "But there; this family gossip ye'll be thinking is a waste of time. I'll send ye copies of the financial statement when they're ready——"

"On the contrary," I assured him, "what you call family gossip interests me very much. Until I understand my uncle's character, I feel I'll never understand——" I paused.

"Understand what?" Mr. Blair's eyebrows went up. His grey eyes looked coldly into mine. Had I seen a shred of sympathy or the faintest hint of warmth or humour in them, I believe I would have unburdened myself of my experiences of the previous evening—I believe I would have asked (and taken) his advice. But in his gaze I could see nothing but a chilling suspicion, and

I blundered as best I could out of the sentence I had started :

“ Oh, the will business,” I concluded hastily. “ It does seem queer.”

“ I don’t agree with you,” said Mr. Blair. “ No queerer than anything else about the man. This minister Shaw was his only friend. What else do you expect ? And now, Mr. Drysdale, touching this matter of renting the Hall. I strongly advise you to accept the offer. What are your views ? ”

“ Who’s the man making the offer ? ” I inquired.

Mr. Blair looked through some letters in a wire basket. “ A Mr. Seymore. S. Seymore is his name. He writes from the North British Hotel. He has been in business in the East, he says, and has been getting his affairs wound up. He wants to settle down, and thinks Brackenbridge Hall would suit him. He says he has lived near Brackenbridge for a year or so and likes the climate. He seems to be a man of substance, and it’s a firm offer.”

“ I’m in two minds about it,” I commented. “ I had half a notion of going and living in the Hall myself.”

At this Mr. Blair dropped back in his chair and looked at the ceiling with half-closed eyes. What his thoughts were I could not guess, and my gaze wandered round the room, till I found he was staring at me with a cynical smile.

“ I’m thinking ye’ve got the Drysdale blood in you,” he remarked. “ I have never heard a dafter suggestion in my life. Live in Brackenbridge Hall on your income ! Why, every year that place is allowed to go on as it’s doing knocks its value down by hundreds—and it’s low enough already, I’ll warrant. Man, can’t you see——” Mr. Blair’s eyes snapped angrily. He shoved a letter across his desk. “ That’s the letter. Go and see the man yourself ! Go and make up your own mind whether he’s a fit tenant for ye ! ”

I was nonplussed. "It's not that I don't want to take your advice," I said uneasily. "Don't think that at all. Only, I fancy I'll like the district, and I thought I could push along there if I lived quietly."

Mr. Blair shook his head. "The place is a white elephant to you. I think ye're very fortunate having that offer in your hands. I've never met the man Seymore, but why not go and see him? He says in the letter he'll be at the N. B. Hotel to-day and to-morrow, and is open for an interview."

"I'll go and see him now," I said, rising, anxious to mollify the lawyer. "And thanks very much indeed for your information and—er—advice. I dare say it's wise——"

"Aye," said Mr. Blair slowly. "Aye, it is wise." He shook hands at the door. For the first time I saw a glint of friendliness in his eyes; but it was only a passing glint, and was gone as he turned from me.

"He's a tough nut if ever there was one," was my inward comment as I made my way along Princes Street to the North British Hotel.

At the office in the front hall, the girl on duty informed me that she thought Mr. Seymore was in: would I kindly take a seat in the lounge while she sent upstairs to his private sitting-room? Private sitting-room sounded opulent. I gave the messenger my card, on which was the address of my London rooms, and I scribbled beside it, with a sudden sensation of pride, "Brackenbridge Hall."

I had not long to wait. Almost immediately the messenger returned with the news that Mr. Seymore was upstairs and would see me at once. His sitting-room was on the first floor, and the messenger ushered me in. It was a pleasant room looking along Princes Street. I glanced around to select a seat.

"Good morning," said a voice behind me.

I turned. At an open door leading to an adjoining bedroom stood a man of about forty-five. He was short, sandy-haired, with spectacles and a genial chubby countenance. He was the man I had seen in the library at Brackenbridge Hall the night before.

## CHAPTER V

### I MAKE AN IMPORTANT DECISION

I HAD just enough presence of mind to say "Good morning." But not another word after that could I utter. The man moved easily across the room and pushed forward an arm-chair, bidding me be seated. The first thing that helped me to recover my self-possession was the growing certainty that Mr. Seymore had no idea I was the disturber of his peace little more than twelve hours previously. I recollected that of course he had had the candlelight in his eyes, that George and I were at the other end of the room, and that he had extinguished the light the moment I shouted. So I got my breath and recovered my poise.

"I've just come from Blair & Ballantyne," I began, "and they tell me you have made an offer for a lease of my house, Brackenbridge Hall."

Mr. Seymore inclined his head. "I have made an offer. . . . A cigar sir?" He pushed over a box of coronas, which I declined; and while he lit one for himself I continued:

"Mr. Blair thought it a good idea if we met and had a preliminary chat about things."

"A good idea," nodded Mr. Seymore, hospitably adding: "May I offer a drink? What cocktail shall I ring for?"

"I hate to take your drink," I said with a laugh, "because I've come along to say I don't think I'll accept your offer for the Hall."

Mr. Seymore chuckled softly and waved a chubby

hand, on the little finger of which sparkled a deep red gem.

"Two martinis," he said into the 'phone beside the mantelpiece; "Mr. Seymore's sitting-room." And he dropped back into his arm-chair, and took a long comfortable pull at his cigar.

"It's a lovely spot, Brackenbridge," he said in his staccato voice, exhaling a white cloud. "I know it well. Do you know it at all, Mr. "—he glanced at my card on the table beside me—"Mr. Drysdale?"

"Just passed through it," I said, very much on the *qui vive*. I wondered whether, after all, he didn't suspect the truth, and this were his first feeler. But his next remark took a different tack:

"I lived in the hotel in the village for a bit. I fish a little, but it's water-colour sketching I'm really fond of, you know. The country round about is a paradise for the water-colourist. But of course I got fed up with that hotel."

"One would," I said politely. "The best of 'em pall after a bit."

"Quite. Well, of course I didn't want to leave the district, so I hunted round a bit and in the end got digs. And there I've stuck for about a year! Oh, they're homely enough, in all conscience. Not like this." He pointed around to the pleasant room and smiled quietly. "Ah, here are our drinks! Your very good health, Mr. Drysdale. Here's to our better acquaintance."

I reciprocated suitably; and, as he seemed bent on talking about himself, I waited for him to continue.

"A dear old girl, my landlady," he said, taking another sip. "Sister of a farmer fellow. She keeps house for him. I believe, by the way, the man's a tenant of yours, if not in some way an agent or factor. Forsyth's the name."



"He's the factor of the estate," I agreed, recognizing the name. "So Blair told me just now."

"Quite," said Mr. Seymore. "Between ourselves, a bit of a surly dog," he added confidentially, "but as Forsyth and I never come across each other, the state of his liver doesn't worry me. I've spent a very quiet and happy year there, and now I want my affairs wound up—I'm an Eastern merchant—and settle down permanently. Permanently. . . . At Brackenbridge Hall!" He laughed again, and leant forward, resting his elbows on his knees and regarding me with a wide, challenging smile. "Now Mr. Drysdale, what about it?"

"Well," I began, "I don't quite know what to say. I had practically decided to live there myself."

"And if you knew the district and the house, my good sir, there would be no doubt about it! It is charming—if one can afford it." He looked at me quizzically. "If not——" He shrugged his shoulders.

"Of course I've a private income," I said quickly, determined to show a bold front.

"Forgive me," he said, his eyes clouding. "I did not mean to be personal. I apologize—it was stupid of me——"

"Not at all," I replied. "What you say is perfectly true. One needs a sizable income to run a house like Brackenbridge Hall decently. It's one of the things that makes me hesitate. Otherwise, I may tell you frankly, I shouldn't have troubled even coming to call on you."

Mr. Seymore nodded. "Quite so, quite so."

"Naturally I thank you for your offer," I added. "But I'd like time to think it over. Shall we leave it like this: Mr. Blair will write you in a couple of days giving my decision?"

"My dear Mr. Drysdale," said Mr. Seymore, pulling his chair closer, "it's very decent of you putting it that way.

But look here. Why should we beat about the bush? I think we recognize each other as to some extent—shall we say?—kindred spirits. At least, we're men of the world and understand each other, and I'm sure we look at things in much the same way. Now, my offer was two hundred a year. To tell you the truth, I simply can't bear the awful thought of having to fag all round the countryside looking for some house that after all mayn't suit me half as well. Shall we say three hundred a year, I will keep the place in repair, and we call it a bargain?"

He jerked himself upright in his chair and looked straight at me, the picture of alertness, his hand poised in mid-air, the cigar with its long ash between the first and second finger. Then he lay back in his chair and smiled. "It doesn't tempt you?"

"That's just the trouble," I said. "It does!"

"I see what you mean," he murmured slowly. "It's not merely the three hundred in your pocket—you mean, you'd be saved the expense of keeping the place up. Of course you're quite right there. Mr. Drysdale!" His voice snapped out the words crisply. "What's a few pounds either way? My last words on the subject." He laid his cigar on the ash-tray and extended his hand as if to shake mine. "Call it three-fifty a year, and it's finished!"

He smiled. The plump white hand, with its red gem glittering, came towards me wide open. "I knew you would!" His smile widened. "No? Mr. Drysdale, you are a very old-fashioned Scotsman! Well, I admire it." He shrugged his shoulders and laughed.

I rose to my feet.

"I'm most awfully sorry," I said. "I really can't make up my mind now. But I promise you'll hear from the lawyer people in a couple of days."

"You'll have another drink, of course, before you go?"

His hand was on the telephone, but I stayed him in time.

"In a couple of days," I said, bidding him good-bye, "you'll hear. Not longer. I promise."

"I'm returning to my rooms at the farm on Monday. It's possible we may meet then," he said slowly, with a confiding smile. "By that time I think you'll have decided to accept my offer. At least I have my hopes! Good-bye."

George puffed into the Caledonian grill two minutes late. I had already secured a table, and during the first half of the meal I regaled him with a detailed account of my two interviews.

"Judging from your description," said George when I had completed my narrative, "judging from your description, I'd say this fellow Blair, the solicitor, was a dirty dog, who wants to do you down if he can. Did he try to borrow a tenner or anything?"

"Of course not. He was frightfully business-like."

"A grasping old scoundrel. That's the impression you've been trying to give me of him for the last twenty minutes. Just as you've been telling me in so many words that this Seymore man is a paragon of all the virtues. Drinking together, smoking together, swapping stories, making the welkin ring. In fact, two dear old college pals having a reunion. That's the picture I've got of friend Seymore and you. Is that what you meant?"

"Hardly," I chuckled. "Certainly, Seymore was human and hospitable, just as the lawyer was hard and gruff. But Seymore was more than merely pally—he was decidedly clever. It was obvious he's been a business man all his life, and a pretty smart one I should say. I should also say he wants very badly to rent Brackenbridge Hall. In fact, he almost doubled the rent he first offered."

George whistled. "Doubled it, by gad! Pretty good going for a business man. Should have thought he'd try

to knock you down a bit instead. And what did you say ? ”

“ I’m to let him know in a couple of days.”

“ That’s the ticket ! Let loose a Drysdale on a proposition like this, and the ancestral blood gets busy. You’ll work old Seymore up to such a pitch of frenzy that he’ll quadruple the rent rather than let the place go.”

“ I do believe he would,” I murmured slowly.

“ You do ? ” George looked at me seriously. “ Now I wonder why.”

“ That,” I said, “ is what I intend to find out.”

George assented. “ There’s something more in it than meets the eye. I vote we have a rummage round the place to-morrow.”

“ To-morrow ? To-day, you mean—I’m losing no time on this job.”

George’s face clouded. “ Do you mind, old thing, if I don’t join you till to-morrow forenoon ? I’m deuced sorry about it, but can’t see how I can fit things in otherwise. I met a Home Office fellow here and he wants me to dine with him to-night, a sort of semi-official affair, to chat over some business he’s here for. Then there’s my kit. I’ve heaps to buy and can’t possibly finish it all off before to-morrow morning. If you want to push on to Brackenbridge now, do. I’ll buy any stuff for you that you think you’ll need.”

“ Thanks,” I said. “ I wish you would.” I enumerated some articles for him to procure. “ And,” I added, “ get me a good, serviceable little Webley automatic.”

“ That’s what I like to hear,” chuckled George, jotting down the final item. “ Gives me a thrill, that does. *Two* automatics, I’ll get. You wouldn’t leave your Uncle Georgie out in the cold ? And now, if you want to get back, what about your train ? ”

I found I had time to stroll along Princes Street

comfortably and catch it, while George made his way to a fishing-tackle shop.

"Leave some fun over for me," he implored as we parted. "Don't go clearing everything before I arrive. Cheerio, then, till the morning."

George, it struck me, was an optimist if he expected everything to be as clear as daylight by the morrow ; and yet there was no saying when I might stumble upon some small fact that would go far towards an explanation of a series of events that were, to put it mildly, out of the common.

"Some small insignificant fact," I repeated, and I was brought up with a jerk. Staring me in the face where I stood was a fact neither small nor insignificant. How important was its bearing on my own circumstances, I could not guess ; but there was the fact, take it or leave it ; and I could put what construction upon it I chose.

I was approaching the North British Hotel and had been on the point of turning down the steps to the Waverley Station. My glance wandered upwards. There at the very window which I realized was that of Mr. Seymore's sitting-room where I had been that morning, I saw a figure which I recognized with a start of surprise and dismay. It was that of Marget Shaw, daughter of the Brackenbridge minister ; and, her beautiful face clouded and anxious, she was gazing among the people passing and repassing on the crowded pavement below.

I was thankful I had the presence of mind to step quickly forward to a position where she could not see me. To say that I was wretchedly disturbed at what I had just seen is to gloss over the truth. Seymore had something afoot, something to do with Brackenbridge Hall, and he obviously wanted me to clear out and rent him my house. But that Marget should be mixed up with him in any way dragged in a new and unpleasant element. Five minutes

before, I should have said the thing was impossible ; I should have admitted that they might be acquainted, living in the same district, but not that Marget should be in Seymore's sitting-room at the hotel not two hours after I had been there discussing the affair of the Hall with him. And yet I had just seen her with my own eyes !

Even as I pondered, gazing vaguely among the passers-by, I was again caught up short.

" Ah," I said to myself, " that's who she was looking for ! "

A black figure in front of the hotel steps detached itself from the mingling stream of people, and pausing, looked quickly up and down, then ran up the steps and disappeared into the hotel. It was the Reverend Duncan Shaw, Marget's father. I should have known his white face with the black, quick, eager eyes anywhere.

Here indeed was data for much reflection—not calm reflection, for I found it difficult to remain calm when I thought of Marget being mixed up in any way with Seymore. Standing there at the corner, my brain worked quickly. I came to a sudden decision. With my stick I attracted the eye of a passing taxi driver and, crossing the pavement, entered his cab. " Drive to Castle Street," I ordered, and gave him Mr. Blair's number. " Hurry, for I've only twenty minutes to catch my train."



## CHAPTER VI

### IN THE NIGHT

**I** DID catch my train. I caught it with some minutes to spare ; and in my pocket reposed the keys of my dead relative ; and on Mr. Blair's writing pad was a memo reminding him to draft a letter on the morrow to Mr. Seymore declining his offer for the Hall, as the present proprietor, Mr. Ronald Drysdale, was going into residence there himself. The interview with Mr. Blair had been brief. But it had been pointed.

Now, to reach Brackenbridge, one changes at St. Eildon ; and on the St. Eildon platform I ran plump into Mr. Shaw and Marget. I half suspected they might travel with that train ; at any rate I thought it possible ; and accordingly my greeting was easy and without constraint. But my birse was up (as one says of an angry dog in the north) and I was determined to see this whole affair through, suspecting every one, irrespective of my likes or dislikes, and keeping my eyes very wide for anything that might give me the faintest help : I would get to the bottom of it or call myself either a fool or a coward. Therefore I was glad of the chance of travelling the rest of the way with Mr. Shaw and Marget.

Marget : that was my snag. " Suspecting every one," I had said. As I sat there opposite her, looking at her fresh young beauty, delicately browned with the sun and wind of these high hills, and her bright eyes meeting mine unafraid, how could I possibly suspect her of an action that an angel could be ashamed of ? It was unthinkable. But facts were facts.

In the course of talk, Mr. Shaw casually explained his mission to the city. He had been attending a church conference. "I like to take Marget with me on these very occasional visits to the town," he said. "I'm afraid it's very slow for her at Brackenbridge, with a dull old dog for a father!" He patted her arm affectionately.

"I've been in to see my lawyer," I said. "I have given him my decision about what I'm going to do with the Hall."

Mr. Shaw leant forward, peering into my face as if to read my mind. "Yes, yes?" he said eagerly. "So you have finally made up your mind about it?"

"I've made up my mind," I told him off-handedly. "I'm going to live there myself. So we'll be neighbours."

Mr. Shaw's lips opened; he stared at me with wide eyes. Then he turned and for a long time looked out of the window in silence: a silence which I did not break. I could feel Marget's eyes watching me intently.

"Mr. Drysdale," said the minister, turning to me again, "I hope you will be very happy at Brackenbridge. If there's anything in the world I can do to add to your comfort, you have only to ask—your comfort, or happiness"—he paused—"or your safety." His voice dropped at the last word.

"Thanks very much!" I exclaimed. "I am sure you'll be of immense help in many ways. As far as my safety goes, I think I can look after myself."

"Are you staying at the inn to-night?" he inquired. "If not, we'll be delighted to put you up at the Manse. We can manage that, can't we, Marget?"

"Not the slightest trouble," smiled Marget. "I'm sure we'll be charmed, Mr. Drysdale. Why not stay at the Manse till the Hall is ready for you?"

"Again thanks," I said. "There's no end to your kindness. But if you don't mind, I won't trouble you. I

want to have a good look round the Hall this afternoon and evening and see what's to be done. By the way, you could help me in one thing—could you direct me to Forsyth's farm? He's the estate agent, I understand."

"Marget will take you there with pleasure," said Mr. Shaw. "It's about a quarter of a mile up the lane from the Hall. You'll have a cup of tea with us first, of course."

Under a tree in the Manse garden I feasted my soul on the splendid peace of the place, and my eyes on Marget's beauty. The beauty was substantial enough; it sparkled in every movement of her eyes, every turn of her head. But the peace, I felt, was fictitious; it was peace only on the surface; and underneath were sinister rumblings of which I had only had vague and scattered hints. I shook hands with my host; and my young hostess conveyed me across the fields by a footpath that led to the Home Farm. It was here she told me that my factor, Forsyth, lived. The place cowered among trees, a low and rather rambling house, with a wing jutting out into the garden. Marget was about to go round to the back, when she pulled herself up with a laugh.

"Oh," she cried, "what a *faux pas*! Taking the laird to the back door! It would never do. I come here for butter and eggs, and of course I always go round to the back. Come this way to the front door, Mr. Laird!"

We retraced our steps and entered by the little white gate. While Marget rang the bell, which creaked rustily, I took stock of the surroundings. At the far end of the garden, another white gate led into the lane, which was shut off with a line of thick bushes. A French window from the back of the jutting wing led on to a fairly well-kept lawn. It was here, I recollected, that the man

Seymore lodged. The place, though gloomy, was not unattractive; and I could imagine Seymore's mute approval of its solitude, for it was indeed set in a secluded nook. I wondered which was his room, and would have asked Marget; but as the man's name had never been mentioned between us, I decided to keep my peace for a while on that subject.

To our summons on the bell, there was no reply. Not even a dog barked.

"You see," said Marget smiling, "it's not once in a blue moon this bell is rung. Can the laird swallow his dignity and come round to the back after all, do you think?"

She skipped ahead of me, and as we reached the back door in the yard, a tiny grey-haired woman, with timorous eyes like a hare's, emerged from a barn.

"Pardon, miss," she said. "I was at the chickens. Have ye been long?"

"Only a moment," said Marget. "Jessie, this is the new laird. Mr. Drysdale, this is Mr. Forsyth's sister. You'll like Jessie."

The woman bobbed and bid me good afternoon.

"Is Mr. Forsyth about? No? Well, Mr. Drysdale wants to look over the Hall; can you find the keys?"

"Aye, they're in his office," Jessie assured her, and clumped off in her heavy boots at a great speed, returning and handing a small bunch of keys to Marget.

"Mebby, you could show the laird over the Hall, miss?" said Jessie plaintively. "I'm no' decent to take the laird over." She spread out her apron and dolefully regarded her dress.

"With pleasure, Jessie," assented Marget, "if you think Mr. Forsyth won't mind."

Jessie's eyes grew troubled. "Do ye think he would,

miss? I cannae vex him. But if the laird wants to go now——”

“That’s all right, Jessie,” laughed Marget. “You can tell your brother it’s my fault, and Mr. Drysdale particularly wants to go over the house now.” Jessie bobbed again, and we set out for Brackenbridge Hall.

“This lane goes down to the main road at the side of the grounds,” explained Marget. “When we get up the hill a bit you can see the back of the Hall among the trees. Daddy really meant it when he said you could put up at the Manse. Come for as long as you like—why not really stay with us till the Hall’s ready for you?”

“Thanks, but”—I shook my head—“but, you see, there’s my friend George. He’s on holiday, and we’ll be often out at nights fishing. We’d never dream of disturbing the peace of the Manse stumping in at three in the morning wet to the skin.”

“It would be great fun,” insisted Marget.

“For George and me perhaps! No, no; it’s simply topping of you, but we’re much too rowdy a pair. Is there no cottage in the grounds where we could hang out? Some shanty where we could rig up camp-beds and do some cooking on a Primus stove?”

“Oh, you mean to rough it? Well, perhaps that’s better fun still. There’s a gardener’s cottage near the back gates. I’ll show you on our way in. It’s unoccupied, of course, but I believe there’s some furniture in it, though not much.”

“It’ll suit us down to the ground,” I assured her. “Lead me to the spot, and I’ll get my kit moved from the inn this very evening.”

“You’re a dasher,” chuckled Marget candidly. “You’re not going to let the grass grow under your feet. Well, here we are.”

The hedge at the lane-side gave place to a high wall, which was topped by heavy trees ; and presently we came to wooden gates.

" Allow me." I stepped forward and took the keys ; the gates swung back. It was indeed a scene of desolation that met my eyes behind these sheltering walls. Nettles overgrew the sides of the drive, that curved among the trees to a jumble of low buildings which looked like stables. We pulled the gates close, and I followed Marget along a path to the cottage that had once (but for a long, long time had obviously not) housed a gardener.

" Just what I want," I said shortly, when we had gone through it. " Three or four rooms and a kitchen. Is there anyone in the village who could come in and slop up after us ? "

" Jessie, from the Home Farm, you know, did all old Mr. Drysdale's cooking—everything. I'm certain she'll be glad to do anything for you too."

" Splendid ! It couldn't be better. This gardener's cottage was a bright idea of yours. I'll get my stuff shifted in to-night."

" Well, I'm glad you're pleased with your billet," said Marget. She pulled the door shut, and took me by another path to the stabling and outhouses, all of which looked as if they had not been disturbed for years ; panes of glass were missing, locks rusty, and grass sprouted between the cobblestones in the yard.

" Now the Hall," said my guide, and we made through a courtyard for the back door. Standing there while Marget selected the key, I smiled to think of the last time I had entered that house, and the curious events that occurred within. How much, I wondered, did the girl know about it all ? One glance into her eyes and the answer was clear. She knew nothing. And yet there was some connexion between the Shaws and the man Seymore, a connexion I



could not understand, but which I felt certain time would reveal. And whoever was in the right or in the wrong, this girl, I knew in my heart would come out of it all with clean hands.

We wandered from room to room.

"Most of the house was practically never used," said Marget. "Jessie gave it a sort of spring clean now and then, but old Mr. Drysdale lived in the library. That, his bedroom, and a tiny little cubby-hole downstairs where his meals were set, were the only rooms he ever looked into. A queer fish, if you like, but underneath it all a nice old man. He could be charming, even cavalier, when he felt in the mood. This is the library. Ugh ! it's dark."

Marget went forward and furled back the heavy curtains. A chair lay sprawling on the hearthrug, and a small table was overturned : results of the tumult of the night before. My eyes ran over the cabinet which the man Seymore had been tapping so earnestly. It was a great old heavy writing bureau of a pattern as common in antique shops as leaves on Vallombrosa. The chair that had sent me spinning had, I observed, left a slight dent in the right-hand panel. "We'll go through it, George and I, to-morrow," I said to myself.

"Somebody's been careless in the dark," remarked Marget, putting the tumbled items to rights. "Have you ever seen so many books in your life—— I say, you're very quiet all of a sudden ! Penny for them."

"Sorry," I laughed, pulling myself together. "I was just thinking of the queer life my old relative lived here. No wonder people looked strangely at us when we asked where the Hall was. Years and years of it in this room ! Year after year, never going anywhere, seeing hardly anyone. Golly !"

"And now you," said Marget, "propose to follow in his

footsteps ! Year after year—well, I hope you'll pop into the Manse now and then, and sing us a comic song, or do something cheery ! . . . You've quite made up your mind to live in the Hall ? ” Her voice had changed to a deeper note, and I saw the old strained look in her eyes. “ No going back on it now ? ”

“ No going back ! ” I exclaimed. “ No question of that at all. *J'y suis, j'y reste !* I'm here for good.”

I was quite unprepared for the next thing that happened, and I could only stand back feeling like a stupid and awkward ass. For Marget had suddenly turned from me, and was leaning against the shutter by the window, her face hidden in her hands, great sobs shaking her slim body. I caught my breath. That she should cry like this !—the thing was utterly causeless. I had said nothing to vex her. Could it be that—the idea jerked me up sharp—that she was crying because of me : because of my definite and final decision to live here : because of my safety ?

With a bursting feeling of compassion and tenderness, I stepped to her side. I murmured stupid melting things which sounded absurd in my ears, and all the while my heart was drumming with love for her. Suddenly I put my arms round her, and drew her close to me, sobs, tears, and everything. Her slight body quivered, and her head was limp upon my shoulder, her face still hidden in her hands. The sweet, fresh fragrance of her was the most beautiful thing in the world. Softly I took her firm, browned fingers from her face. The eyes, with the lashes thick with tears, opened and looked up into mine, startled and timid, and she breathed one long shuddering breath. With a cry I drew her closer still and leant to kiss the wet lips, when, with an exclamation, she broke away from me and cowered back against the curtain.

“ Marget, my love ! ” I said. “ You know I care

for you—you knew from the first moment I spoke to you ! ”

“ Hush,” she said, brushing the tears from her cheeks. “ You mustn’t say that. You must never say that again.”

“ Why ?—do you hate me so much ? ”

“ You know I don’t,” she said, almost bitterly, in a low voice. “ But, oh, I do want us to be just good pals.”

“ But tell me, Marget,” I insisted, coming near her again, “ do you care for me at all ? ”

“ No, no,” she cried. “ I can’t—I mustn’t say that. We must be friends—can’t you understand ? ” She clasped her hands, and her eyes were full of troubled shadows.

“ You mean—there’s someone else you care for ? ”

She shook her head vaguely. “ You mustn’t ask me that ! Promise never to ask me that again. Promise never to speak of it again. It is useless, it is impossible.” She held out her hand to me. “ Shake on it, Ronny,” she said, recovering her composure and smiling a little. “ Shake ! We’re pals.”

We shook hands solemnly, then both at the same instant burst out laughing. It was but the reaction after those moments of acute tension, and I think that laugh sealed our friendship.

But it also sealed my lips. That handshake and that laugh set up a barrier between us. Marget had some other loyalties into which I must not pry—at least I was debarred from asking her to disclose them—and how much or how little they had to do with my own position and the queer current of events that had swept me along, I could not discern.

“ Marget,” I said, after a pause in which we had both wandered round the huge library, “ I know why you cried just now.”

"So do I," she replied smiling. "Because I was a little fool."

"No, but because you thought *me* a fool. A fool, that is, to come and live here. You cried because you know or guess there's something rummy going on, and it isn't good for my health to be here."

"I have said so," she nodded. "I said so last night. But I know no more than that—I don't even know that for certain; I'm only making a wild guess. But on the other hand you may be right; there may be nothing in it."

"I don't say there's nothing in it," I said quickly. "Far from it. But I do say I'm going to live in Brackenbridge Hall, and I'm going to get to the bottom of things."

"Promise me," she burst out seriously, laying a hand on my arm, "promise me you'll be careful!"

"I can promise anyone who monkeys about here," I declared with vigour, "that they'll have a pretty stormy passage!"

Marget laughed, throwing back her head in a characteristic way. "I'm not so frightened for you now. Not when you look like that! Yes, I do believe you're what's called a tough customer."

"I'm more than that," I insisted stoutly. "I'm what's called a reg'lar rough-neck!"

"Come and see the rest of your house," said Marget with a smile.

. . . . .

It was with many queer thoughts in my mind that I went to bed that night in the gardener's cottage. A day or two ago I had been part of the sales organization of a motor firm in Piccadilly; now I was a Scotch laird. And surely no laird ever entered upon the enjoyment of his

possessions under stranger circumstances. I reviewed them in my mind : the meeting with the girl ; the episode in the library ; the warning of Mr. Shaw, the clergyman ; the advice of Marget so tenderly given in the darkness ; the keenness of Mr. Blair, the lawyer, that I should rent the Hall ; the interview with Seymore ; Marget and her father in his sitting-room at the hotel two hours later ; Marget's rejection of my advances for some obscure reason I could not divine—these formed a queer phantasmagoria in my mind as I blew out the candle and tried to sleep.

I must have fallen into a troubled slumber, for I awoke with the impression that I was still talking to Marget, trying vainly to find reasons why I should remain at Brackenbridge Hall. I wanted to tell her that I was staying chiefly to be near her, but I couldn't express myself in words. And in desperation I awoke. I awoke and heard a twig snap in the tangle of undergrowth outside my window. It was so faint that, if I had been asleep, instead of in the semi-consciousness of self-reproach that follows a stupid dream, it would not have jerked me broad awake as it did, and sent my mind floundering into a state of keen alertness.

I sat up in bed. Yes ; I was positive I could hear a faint sound at the window. The window I had opened wide before sleeping ; now it was but the dimmest blur ; and the room was in pitch blackness.

Silently I slipped out of bed. My hand groped behind me on the dressing-table : I recollected that I had placed there a large clothes-brush with a thick handle. I felt along the edge of the table, found the brush, and stood still waiting.

Someone was breathing in the room, and there was a step put down on the bare boards of the floor with the soft tread of a cat. Then there was a movement. Something

hit the bed with a thud that made the springs jerk. There was a slight rustle at the window ; then silence. I scratched a match. A great knife was buried in the bedclothes up to the shaft, in the spot where my heart had been a few moments before.



## CHAPTER VII

### WE MAKE A CURIOUS DISCOVERY

“ **H**ULLO, there ! Hullo, hullo ! ”

It was George's voice. The morning sun was coming down through the trees into the diminutive kitchen where I was sitting smoking a cigarette and waiting for the kettle to boil. I was still in pyjamas, for I had just got up. The hour, I observed to my horror, was eleven-thirty, but I felt on second thoughts that I had every excuse for extending that “ extra ten minutes ” in bed, which is popularly deemed the pleasantest of all, into a few hours. It had been, indeed, for me the queerest night I had known since the war closed down. To awake and hear an unknown person crawl into your bedroom, and to slip out of bed just in time to avoid being dirked in cold blood, is a singularly unpleasant sensation. My first action had been to shut and lock every window with what silence I could, and I sat waiting for further developments. But the would-be murderer had done enough for one night. Whether or not he imagined his blow had been successful, I couldn't tell. There had been no sound ; so apparently he had concluded his victim's voice was stilled for ever ; and his sole anxiety was to make good his escape with silence and speed. For two hours I waited ; then, taking a travelling rug, I lay down on the hard couch in the next room, with an iron poker within reach, prepared for anything. I awoke late, and very peckish, and it was with a whoop of joy that I heard George's view-halloo in the morning air. I pattered out of doors in pyjamas and slippers.

"Hullo, hullo there, Ronny!"

I made down the path. He was standing on the tangled drive, lifting up his voice in various directions, when I called to him.

"By jove, Ronny, where on earth did you get to! Front gate's locked, back gate's locked—only that little one in the wall open. I went to the inn first, of course, and they said our kit was shunted last night to some gardener's cottage."

"Yes, it's back through the trees there," I told him. "It's a bit rough and ready, but I think you'll like it. Wait till I buzz in for the key, and we'll swing open the gates for your snorting steed."

Having run the car into a suitable shed, we made our way to the cottage, where the kettle was boiling merrily. "Have some brekker?" I suggested, dropping eggs into a pan—I had found both eggs and milk on the doorstep and blessed Jessie's forethought.

"Brekker?" George hooted with derision. "I want my lunch in half an hour, my son. Brekker? Of all the lazy dogs. . . ."

"Hold your judgment," I recommended. "Come and have a look at this."

I took him into my bedroom.

"A pleasant chamber," said George affably. "Small but airy. Nice outlook into a bed of nettles and a beech hedge—what's that! Great Scott!"

I was pointing to the knife, which still stuck in the heap of bedclothes.

"Do you mean," said George breathlessly, "that this really happened? It's not one of your little leg-pulls?"

"It happened at exactly two-thirty this morning," I told him. "I slid out of bed not very many seconds too soon, otherwise——" I shrugged my shoulders.

George dropped in a chair and flung down his cap.

"Then it's true," he said.

"What's true?"

"Everything! What that parson said. What that girl said. That if you stay here you've got to bite the bullet—got to realize that somebody wants you out of the way pretty badly. I don't mind telling you, old man, the sight of that rattled me up considerably just now."

"Not so much as it rattled me when I saw the thing sticking there at two-thirty a.m."

I pulled out the knife. It had a smooth, hollow, wooden handle some six inches long, with a vicious tapering blade of the same length. "Where would you say this was made?"

"Birmingham," said George shortly, detaching the blade from its spring socket and slipping it home into the sheath in the handle. "There's no clue to its owner about this." He flung the knife on the dressing-table. "No; the only information we get from this is that somebody means business, and they've lost no time either. Yet," he continued reflectively, "I couldn't get it out of my head that that parson chap was slightly potty—imagined things, you know—that possibly the loneliness of the place and the death of his old friend Drysdale got on his nerves—and that there *might* be some natural enough explanation of the other things." He rose to his feet. "But that idea is washed out for good. This means business, Ronny, my son. We've got to face it. And we'd better get down to hard tacks at once."

I nodded.

"The first thing," continued George seriously, "is what are you going to do about it? Doesn't it strike you as—to put it crudely—a mug's game hanging about here waiting to be stabbed in the back? Is it worth the candle?"

"Do you mean, should I clear out and——"

George assented. "That's just it. Our hands are tied. We're absolutely in the dark. I suppose nothing else has happened since I saw you?"

As briefly as I could, I gave George an account of my doings since I left him after lunch the day before: how I had seen Marget at Seymore's window; her father entering the hotel presumably to join them; my hurried though final decision to live in the Hall myself and my second brief visit to Mr. Blair, the lawyer, to tell him so; my calling at the Home Farm with Marget, and our subsequent pilgrimage through the house and grounds, keeping back only my feeling towards the girl, but indicating that she was rather upset—as was her father—that my decision to hang on to the Hall was irrevocable.

"There you are!" said George when I had finished. "With every step the tangle gets worse instead of better. There's Seymore, there's Blair, there's this parson, there's the girl. Yes, there's also that big fellow with Seymore in the library. And there's the third man we never saw in the dark. It's baffling. That Seymore man you mention—well, you'll be interested to hear I saw him myself this morning. I put up at the N. B. Hotel, and when I popped down to the coffee-room to brekker, he was sitting in the corner champing bacon and eggs. I spotted his sandy hair and cherubic face at once, though it was only a glimpse I got in the library. He must have stayed at the N. B. last night, for you interviewed him there yesterday. So he's off your list of possible knife-wielders. No, old son, there are too many threads, too many knots, to know where to begin. What's your view about clearing out, leasing the darned place, and popping off to some little hotel on the east coast? I know some topping spots round there."

"If you go," I said almost angrily, "you go alone! I'm going to see this through, though I get spiked through

the neck in the process. If a few half-baked assassins, who can only fight in the dark, think they're going to scare me off, they've never made a greater mistake in their little lives. So that's my last word on the subject!"

George chuckled. "Forgive me, Ronny. I had to put it to you that way. I just had to!—don't you see? It's you who're in danger—it's you that's got to be considered first. If you're determined to stick it out, then I'm determined to weigh in with you!"

"George——" I began fervently.

"Don't look so grateful, you old owl! I tell you I'm looking forward to it like anything. The war was horrible, but, by gad, it did stir you up—jog you into activity. That's what I feel like now. Only we've got to use our old beans a bit more. Whoever's at the back of this—Seymore or whoever it may be—is probably a bit more wily than the bone-headed Hun was. So we've got to be wilier still. It's the unclosed eye for us! We've got to lamp that cove Seymore and the whole roost of them, till we get a few more facts to work on. And we've got this to guard us!" He fumbled in a suit-case for a moment and clapped upon the table a couple of little Webley automatics. "Aren't they dandies! Go and put on your trousers, Ronny, just for the joy of shoving it in your hip pocket!" He tossed one over to me, and I gripped in my palm its squat, ugly, business-like body of blue-black steel.

"I'm sorry for somebody," I exclaimed, clicking my finger round the trigger. "But I wish I knew now who that somebody's to be!"

"Time will tell us that," said George grimly. "And now I'm hungry. Definitely hungry. Since you invited me to breakfast, I invite you to lunch—I see you're still nibbling away like an old rabbit." He disappeared into the passage, where we had dumped his fresh luggage from



the car, and returned with various parcels piled on a wooden box which he was dragging behind him. "Food and wine for the workers," chanted George, producing and opening a bottle of claret, and proceeding to empty on a row of plates an assortment of cold meats and fruits of most appetizing aspect. "We won't starve for a day or two," chuckled George. "I vote you put 'paid' to that rotten brekker you've started on and tuck in to some lunch."

I was by no means loath, and the claret performed its beneficent task as a provoker of cheerfulness in a manner quite worthy of its vintage. "Hunting man," said George ruminatively, puffing a cigarette afterwards, while I shaved and dressed, "is much better fun than hunting game."

"But more dangerous," I remarked.

"That's what I mean," said George. "The point is you don't know who's your friend and who's not. For example, I'd say this about Seymore, that he's either your best friend or your worst enemy. The same applies to the parson chap. The girl——"

"The girl," I cut in, "can be ruled out as far as the enemy business goes. I don't think she'd let us down, not in the tightest corner. In fact I know it. What she may do under compulsion is another matter, but I bet it takes a thundering lot of compulsion if there's any dirty work. You may take it that Marget's as true as steel."

"But she must know more than she says," insisted George.

"I doubt it. But you can soon judge for yourself. We're certain to meet her often. And now I'm ready for the fray. You'd like to see the Hall first of all, I suppose?"

George threw away the stump of his cigarette, lit a pipe, and we set out along the path to the back avenue. The sun was at full noon, and in spite of the ragged flower-beds with their tumbled blooms, the place looked almost cheerful. If the windows had only been open to the



sunshine, and smoke curling up from a chimney, it would have looked nearly habitable. We entered by the back door, and made our way up a passage to the main hall.

"Just as the old beggar left it," murmured George. "Even to his sticks. Poor old fellow. Here, this looks like the family cudgel!" He pulled a stout stick from the stand, and handed it over to me. "A useful knobkerrie in a scuffle, old thing—you collar it."

"I feel like a ghou! looting the old man's stuff already," I laughed, tucking it under my arm. "There isn't much to see downstairs. Let's hurry through it and get up to the library."

"So this is the place where we caught them," mused George as we entered, his eye running slowly over the vast, book-lined spaces. "It was here the old man spent most of his time, you said?"

I nodded. "He came to the Hall about fifty years ago with a permanent grunch against creation. Seems to have snuffled over books all the time and done little else."

"Must have meant to do a good bit of walking in his spare time, judging by the cudgel he bought," said George, glancing at the article under my arm. "Hullo! there's the bureau that Seymore was so interested in when we interrupted their little powwow."

"Thoroughly upset they were too, considering the force that chair was belted at me. Look, here's a mark it made on the bureau when he swung it back to swipe out."

"Where?" said George, leaning forward.

"Hold on a second," I said, running my fingers over the panel. "I saw it yesterday when Marget was showing me round. Plain as a pikestaff it was, a little dent just there."

"Queer," said George; "the mark's gone now."

"It *has* gone!" I exclaimed, straightening myself up, and looking at George nonplussed. "What d'you make of

it ? That mark was as clear as——” I paused. “ George ! ” I cried suddenly, gripping his arm and pointing at the piece of furniture.

“ Well, what are you driving at ? ”

“ This is not the cabinet that was here yesterday ! ”

George looked at me with a puzzled frown. “ Are you quite certain you haven’t made a mistake ? ” he said incredulously. “ The thing seems impossible.”

There are times when one’s brain, keyed up and working rapidly, jumps gaps of logic, like an electric spark, and arrives at a conclusion from which no amount of reasoning will shift it. My mind did that now. To me the thing presented no difficulty. I had seen the little mark on the panel ; I had noticed it particularly ; for I clearly remembered the effort it had been to hold myself from calling to Marget and explaining to her how it had come there. Whether or not my theory that it had been made by the swinging chair was correct, it mattered not. The point was that the mark was gone now !

“ It’s not impossible ; I tell you, it is not ! ” I was excited over the conclusion I had come to, and was impatient because George was slow to agree. “ Look at the cabinet ! It’s deuced like the other, I’ll admit. But it’s not the same. Here, I’ll prove it ! ”

I dug into my pocket and produced a bunch of keys, going quickly over them till I came to a smaller ring with a white ivory tab marked “ Library.” On it three keys hung together.

“ One of these is the right one,” I commented briefly, inserting them one after another in the keyhole. There was no result. The lock would not budge. “ There you are ! One of these three keys fits the cabinet that should stand here. We’ll soon find out which one it is.” I looked around me. There was a locked press built into the wall at the side by the fire-place. A little stumpy key

swung round the lock, and a recess containing a few wine bottles and glasses stood revealed. "That's one," I said.

George nodded, peering inside. "He had a human side after all, the old lad."

But I was already on my knees beside a row of low cupboards, about three feet high, that ran round the entire room below the rows of shelves. After a little trial the one in front of me swung open to another key, and let out clouds of dust, disclosing a tightly packed array of books and manuscripts and bundles of papers tied with faded tape.

"Look," I said, pushing shut the doors and pointing to the last—a long thin key—on the ring, "this is the fellow that should fit the cabinet. We've disposed of the other two."

"But where could this article come from?" said George doubtfully, tapping the cabinet.

I shrugged my shoulders. "How do I know? There are plenty of antique shops in Edinburgh. I should say it wouldn't be difficult getting a duplicate of it—they're fairly common, these heavy old writing bureaus."

"If you hadn't noticed the dent," persisted George, "would you have spotted the difference? I mean, would the fact of the key not fitting have made you suspicious?"

I pondered. "No, I don't think it would. I'd have said I had got hold of the wrong key or something—I shouldn't have worried. But I tell you, I noticed that mark yesterday plainly. There's no doubt about it. Some time during the night, this must have been moved in, and the old bureau moved out."

"I'm coming round to your way of thinking," said George slowly. "I simply can't break down your evidence at all over that dent in the panel. The problem remains: where has the other cabinet gone?"

"Seymore," I said promptly. "I don't think we need look further."

"Seymore's in Edinburgh—been there since yesterday."

"So we imagine! At any rate, I'd give a lot to see through his rooms at the farm," I declared.

"I wonder if it's there," murmured George.

"Can you remember what Seymore was saying that night we found him in the library?" I inquired.

George shook his head. "I can remember he was sitting there tapping it with his fingers. He seemed to be getting something dashed important off his chest."

"Yes, he was saying to the other man that he could swear it was in the cabinet. '*It.*' What was the '*it*'? I'd give anything to know what he was referring to. And then he was cursing himself about something. I remember it vividly. He was saying they were fools not to collar the old man's keys before Blair took them away. It seems to me we'll never be able to make head or tail of it till we find out what it is he wanted from the cabinet."

"And why shouldn't we?" demanded George briskly, at last converted, and beginning to warm up. "Why not carry the war into the enemy's country?"

I looked at him quizzically. "The man said he didn't return till Monday—that's to-morrow. Are you game?"

"On it like a bird. To-night as ever was, my friend. If other people do a bit of night-prowling, why shouldn't we? We'll have a good look at Seymore's quarters to-night. By gad, I wonder what we'll find!"

"I wonder," I said reflectively. We wandered through the bedrooms, splendid apartments, thick with dust and emanating a mouldy smell, to make our way up the small corkscrew stairway towards the attics. Here apparently had been the servants' bedrooms. And then up again into the tower, where you had a view over waving tree-tops to the Lammermuir Hills that swept up ruggedly on the

north to the skyline, the vast heaving shoulders of them like a buttress against the winds from the sea.

"It's rummy to think I own part of these hills," I said pointing with my stick. "A bit of my land is on one of the hill-tops—a small piece, but still it's there. We must make a pilgrimage one of these days and have a look round."

"You ought to build a shooting box there," said George. "Topping base-camp it would make, for fishing or shooting expeditions."

"It's got some old farm buildings already," Blair said. "We might restore 'em a bit and use the place. I'll tap Forsyth, the factor fellow, to-morrow, on the subject."

We descended and strolled back discussing future projects. As we drew near the cottage there were the vigorous sounds of someone busy inside. We drew up.

"If I mistake not," said George, "that's the merry noise of brush and dustpan. Have you got a domestic?"

"A most excellent one. Marget got her for me and must have given her full instructions. An old thing called Jessie. She's the man Forsyth's sister and keeps house for him. She cooked, and what not, for old man Drysdale for years."

I entered the cottage and found Jessie on her hands and knees chasing dust-flakes.

"A fair scunner, sir," she announced from below the table. "No' fit for a pig to live in, far less the laird. I'll no' be pleased till I get it scoured oot."

"Scour ahead, Jessie," I answered blithely, "so long as you scour when we're not here."

"What time would ye like dinner to-night, sir? I've a braw pickle trout I got off a man that caught a bonny basket up the Riddel this morning."

"Splendid! Do you hear that, George? A broad hint to you to get busy with your rod. Jessie, I can see you're



going to look after us well." Jessie smiled appreciatively. "Was old Mr. Drysdale particular about his food?" I inquired chattily.

"A fair finick," said Jessie. "Ate nothing at all, sir, but what there was had to be of the best. A terrible man to deal with, sir. Just sat over his books, and when he did go for a walk it was at night, and no' likely to do him the same good. Maister Shaw, from the Manse, and Maister Seymore were the only folk that went near him. And Miss Marget, of course, he liked to see whiles, but everybody likes to see her."

"Mr. Seymore?" I said. "I understand he lodges with you at the Home Farm?"

"For a year," nodded Jessie, "he's been there. A quiet-like crettur'. Just creeps about with his paint box and bit book, or goes off in that yellow car of his. He's not much trouble, being such a lot away, though most partic'lar about his things."

"In what way?" I asked her, sitting on the table and swinging my legs. Jessie, I saw, was a simple-minded soul, and had settled down to a real good gossip with a sympathetic listener. She might possibly hand out information that would be invaluable.

"Oh, sir," declared Jessie, "he's that shy-like. He has his own wee bit of the house, shut off from the rest, and he will keep it locked when he's gone, so that ye can't get in to clean. I think he must be writing a book, and not want his papers disturbed," she confided. "If any of you young gentlemen are writing a book," she said plaintively, "I'll no' disturb your papers."

"Neither of us has any such intention, Jessie," I said, laughing, "but all the same we're obliged for the promise. By the way, is Mr. Seymore at home to-night?"

Jessie shook her head. "Not till to-morrow morning."

"Oh! I'm coming to see your brother to-morrow



morning. Perhaps I might see Mr. Seymore then. Which are his rooms ? ”

“ That one leading out on the lawn,” said Jessie ; “ that’s his sitting-room, sir. His bedroom’s off it. But as like as not you’ll see him in the garden if the weather’s fine.”

“ By the way,” I said, “ I hope your brother doesn’t think it queer I haven’t been to see him before this ? I’ve been so wretchedly busy all day.”

“ Oh, sir,” said Jessie, excited and explanatory, “ he was expecting ye to send for him. I heard him say he wasn’t sure if ye was wishful for him to continue as your factor.”

“ Tell him not to worry on that score,” I replied. “ I’ll be along after breakfast. If he has any papers to let me see, tell him to have them ready.”

“ Thank ye kindly, sir,” said Jessie. “ Dinner at eight, same as the auld laird ? Thank ye kindly, sir.”

“ And now, George,” I cried, entering his bedroom where he was busy among his belongings, “ if you’re ready we’ll take a stroll down the village, and incidentally call at the Manse to thank Miss Marget Shaw for finding us such a gem of a domestic.”

“ I was wondering,” he replied, stroking his chin, “ what excuse you were going to invent for having tea with that girl ! ”

It was a very pleasant tea anyhow .

## CHAPTER VIII

### NOCTURNAL INVESTIGATIONS

“**A**RE you ready, Ronny, my son?” said George grimly, shoving his head round my door.

My blind was down, and the shutters closed, so that no chink of light from the candle on the dressing-table could escape. I was putting on a pair of shoes with rubber soles, and I gave the laces a final tug and stood up.

“Right you are,” I replied, yawning, not from fatigue but because of suppressed nervousness. The hour was between one and two, and I had lain on my bed and dozed since ten.

“Then fill up with these!” George opened his huge thin fist and emptied a handful of small revolver cartridges on the dressing-table. “Shove what’s over in your pocket.”

I complied slowly, hating the job. To fill that revolver in cold blood savoured to me somehow at that moment of callousness and brutality. But I had to choose between callousness and sheer blind folly: and I decided to be callous and sane.

“That’s done,” I said with relief, clicking the steel chamber home into the squat handle of the automatic, “and now we’re ready for all the Seymores in the world!”

I blew out the candle and locked the cottage door behind us. The night was desperately dark, with a young moon that shone faintly on a wind-blown world as the clouds broke and scattered in black and ominous battalions.

“You’ve got that key all right?” whispered George, as

we made through the bushes, scaled the wall that bordered the Hall grounds, and dropped into a field.

"I've got it," I returned, "and I'll be surprised if I don't get a chance of using it—that is, if you perform your part, you old burglar, and get us in!"

"I've got everything but a jemmy," chuckled George. "Don't you hear me clanking? I'm like an ironmongery store. You mind your own pigeon, my son; I'll bust Seymore's crib all right. I had a batman in France who had been a burglar at one stage of his variegated career, and many an hour the beggar passed telling me the tricks of his trade. The best batman I ever had. Hullo! Where away?"

"The lane's over here," I said, cutting to the right. "It takes us down to the Home Farm."

"All the more reason why we keep away," warned George. "Let's put a hedge between us and the lane. You never know whom we may blunder into."

From this point, George, who in the beginning had been incredulous, seemed to take charge of the affair with an ardour that left me gasping. He avoided the small gate at the Home Farm—it was sure to creak—and we wriggled over the wall into the garden with the stealth of two cats. Taking a survey through the bushes, we ventured out on the dark lawn. The house was silent. The wing protruding brusquely into the garden had an aspect of desolation with its drawn blinds and closed windows.

"That's one of his rooms," I whispered, pointing to a French window that gave directly on the lawn.

George groaned. "French window? We're done. They're generally studded inside with bolts." He tiptoed forward, and I saw the flicker of his electric torch as he ran over it. "It's not, you chump," he muttered, and I could hear him give a chuckle of relief. "It's a big hefty

fellow sure enough, but it's just one of these ordinary push-up affairs. I'll manage it with luck."

The torch flicked out. I could hear the grinding of a blade and the window faintly drumming with vibration as he worked. "Never mind me," he whispered. "Keep your eyes open. We may have to make a quick break-way any of these minutes. Just give me a whistle if I've to scoot!" So following instructions, I went back on the lawn to keep up a rapid survey of the salient points. There were no signs of movement anywhere, and the sibilant chattering of the leaves as the wind bustled among them was the only sound I could hear. Then from the window came a sharp click. The next moment George was beside me.

"Into the bushes, Ronny. I'm taking no risks." When we crouched in the shelter of the shrubbery he added: "I've got it open, but that last knock must have sounded inside like a gun-shot. If the door of the room is open, it must have wakened the household."

"But it isn't," I informed him. "Jessie told me he keeps the door locked when he's away. Grumbling about it, she was—apparently she yearned to get in and mess about with a duster."

"Thank heaven," breathed George. "We'll give it another five minutes, and if nothing crops up we'll pop in and have a squint at Mr. Mysterious Seymore's little outfit."

These minutes lagged past as if the very wheels of time were clogged. I felt like a prisoner with the jury retired to deliberate nonchalantly on their verdict. "Right," muttered George at last; "nothing seems to have happened." And we re-crossed the lawn. "Lend me a hand at this," he added, by the window. "Slowly does it. Don't jerk it, on your life."

Inch by inch we raised that sash; then, as it ran sweetly,

we gained confidence and used more force ; and in the end it slipped up to our touch. In the blackness of the gaping hole Mr. Seymore's rooms lay open before us.

The beam from George's torch cut into the cavern of darkness. A round polished mahogany table, with the black, prickly horsehair chairs of last century, were the first items that met my eye. A heavy couch to match, with a woollen tidy over the back ; old-fashioned oil paintings, of still life and Highland cattle ; gilded vases on the mantelpiece, with dried grasses stuck mournfully therein ; a painted glass fire-screen within the fender—it was the typical farm-house drawing-room. And then, as the torchlight flickered round, from a general impression my eye took in fresh touches that showed indubitably the marks of a more sophisticated taste : boxes of cigars in the corner ; a tantalus with siphons on the sideboard, with two or three unopened bottles of champagne beside them ; an easel with a half-finished painting ; an expensive-looking gramophone, open and with a casual record still in position ; a small bookcase with modern-looking books ; and some photographs of distinction.

We stepped inside. "It's his room all right," said George appraisingly. "But what's through that half-open door ?"

"Have a look," I whispered. "I'm going to try if this other door's locked."

"Is it ?" asked George, playing the light in front of me.

"Locked," I said ; "Jessie was right."

"Then look here !" I softly followed the beam that danced before me ; and George slowly pushed open the door that stood ajar.

We were standing in the entrance to a bedroom. It was large and irregular, with a bed at the other end. A heterogeneous collection of furniture, boxes, and cupboards was distributed around the walls. George stepped

forward and carefully peered behind huge heavy curtains on our right. "Just the window," he muttered. "Nothing there." The torch flickered and paused on a door. The key I saw was not in the lock, and I stepped across and tried the handle. "It's all right," I whispered. "He probably doesn't use this door at all. I should say it leads to the passage like the other."

"This seems to be everything then," muttered George, the ray making another circle round the room. "And we've drawn blank, Ronny, old son. There's no cabinet here."

"Doesn't look like it," I grunted. "I wonder if this door really does lead into the passage. Perhaps it's a cupboard or something."

"Wait," said George. "I want to look in here." He played the beam upon a wide recess in the corner, with chintz curtains draped in front. "Seems to use it as a wardrobe," he remarked. "By jove, he has some kit too." He indicated the breadth of the recess, and dived behind the curtain like a terrier dog. "Hullo! Look here!" He pulled wide the protective drapery, and disclosed, behind the thick array of hanging garments, the object of our search. It was indeed the bureau from the library of the Hall.

"Got it!" I whispered excitedly, diving in my pocket for the key.

"Now look here," said George crisply, "this is your job. My bit's finished. Go through it as quickly as you can; I'll leave you the torch. Take everything you think our friend might be after—you never know what his game is."

"But where are you going?" I asked, taken aback.

"To watch," said George briefly. "We've run risks enough already to-night, and we're taking no more. I'm going to wait on the lawn till you're through. I'll let you know at once if anything stirs. Does your key unlock it?"



"Like a charm," I said, and heard him slipping away from me in the darkness. There was no time to lose. I tucked back the curtain, pushed the dangling clothes out of my way, set the torch on the floor where its beam was best to work by, and I lifted the heavy panelled lid.

The pigeon-holes were full, and I tore out the contents, one by one, feverishly running through them, and stuffing them back. There was nothing but old bills and papers relating to the estate, valueless to anyone as far as I could see. The drawers below seemed to be actuated from the main-lock, and they drew out to my touch.

At this point in my search a feeling of acute discomfort came over my mind. I paused and listened intently. The house was silent. I switched off the torch and looked about me in the blackness. Everything seemed normal. And yet I was not satisfied. I got to my feet quietly, felt my way to the doorway, and entered the sitting-room. The fresh night air from the open window struck my face, but the room was as I had left it a few minutes before. I moved across to the window and looked out. A figure stood motionless in the middle of the lawn. And my heart jumped to my throat. Was that George, or was it someone else? I had a vague idea of making a dash for the shrubbery; but pulling myself together, I stepped out on the lawn. Like a flash the figure swung round, and I could have laughed aloud with joy. In a few quick strides George was beside me.

"What's up? What's up?"

"Nothing," I said. "I had the feeling something had gone wrong. I—I wondered if you were all right, that's all."

"Finished your job? Got anything?" George's voice was low and impatient.

"Not quite finished yet," I admitted.

"Then get back, you chump," growled George angrily.

"Every minute adds to the risk in a game like this. You're wasting time, man."

Cursing myself for a nervous fool, I returned to my place, switched on the torch again and tackled the drawers.

The first one contained books and ledgers, quite as uninteresting as the papers in the pigeon-holes above, all relating to the cost of fencing-wire and slating for a barn, and such like. I rammed them back. The next drawer was as unfruitful, an old cash box containing some silver and postage stamps adding a welcome spice of variety but yielding no comfort. My heart sinking, I pulled out the third drawer, and if anything my heart sank lower when I looked into it. Was there a secret drawer in the thing? What on earth was Seymore after? What was his beastly game? My fingers fluttered hopelessly amid the old books and papers in the bottom compartment. They were all the same, proceedings of threatened litigation over the use of a well on the estate, receipts, receipts, receipts, personal cash books, rent books and repair books, and annual receipts from the sale of fruit from the orchard: I was about to give up the search and tumble them back again, when my hand struck something that was different to the touch. I pulled out the article with a gleam of hope at last.

It was a leather case with heavy silver bands binding it, and it was locked. Well, here was something more interesting. The discovery emboldened me to empty the drawer thoroughly. But nothing beyond the ordinary ruck of things could I find. This, then, may be—must be—the object of Seymore's attention. The thing was heavy and hard beneath the leather covering. I placed it on the floor beside the torch and with what haste I could command I stuffed back the pile of papers and books and locked the cabinet.

It was while I rearranged the clothes in front of the cabinet, and let the curtains swing back into place, that I was suddenly interrupted.

“Put out that light,” snapped George’s grim voice, “there’s somebody coming across the lawn !”

## CHAPTER IX

### THE SECRET OF THE CABINET

**G**EORGE'S words were paralysing. I stood there, the curtain clutched in my hand, unable to utter a sound or make a movement, my brain frozen and useless. I don't suppose, looking back on it, that more than a few seconds passed during this state of numbed impotence ; but at the moment it seemed like a ghastly eternity—as if time were a tangible thing, a thin fine-drawn thread of agony. I wondered afterwards whether, in the seemingly stupid bout of panic I had suffered ten minutes before, there had not been some presentiment of this news that now gripped and held me as if I were a being without volition. With an exclamation of impatience George stooped swiftly to my feet and snatched up and extinguished the electric lamp. In the sudden beneficent darkness my faculties awoke. Somehow this darkness gave security. Half my horror during these few desperate seconds was concentrated on the mental picture of a dark figure swiftly crossing the lawn, while here on the floor was this white evil light, this pallid tell-tale beam of light I was somehow powerless to quench. But now I breathed again.

"We're trapped," said George shortly.

I realized at once the truth of his remark ; for the doors into the passage from both bedroom and sitting-room were locked and keyless. Then I had a burst of hope.

"Couldn't we get out of this window ? "

"Got bars outside," muttered George. "I looked when we came in first."

I stepped quickly across the room in the vague hope he

might have been mistaken. When my hand was on the curtain George drew me up short.

"Don't look!" he snapped at me. "You might give us clean away. Great Scott! the blighter might be round trying to have a squint in that window this mortal moment."

"He'll be in any time now," I gasped.

"No, he won't," said George, "unless he comes in through the house. I've closed down the sitting-room window and fastened it. It was the only thing to do. I had no time to warn you and get us clear. Luckily I heard the gate creak. It just creaked once, but that was enough for me. I was off the lawn and into that room like a streak of greased lightning. Then I heard a pebble on the path. I had hardly got the window shut when I saw him on the lawn."

"Who is it? Could you see?"

"Too dark," grunted George. "Perhaps some village bobby on his rounds. More likely some pal of Seymore's who's paid to keep his eye on things."

"If it's Seymore himself," I said quickly, "he'll be coming in the front door, and meantime we could scuttle by the window."

"Hold on," said George. "Keep dead quiet and I'll see what's happening."

He stole from my side.

"I'm having a look through into the sitting-room," came his whisper in a moment. "He's there at the window with an electric torch."

I felt forward till my hand touched George's shoulder. We held the door nearly closed, and looking through the tiny gap I could see a dim glow of light at the window.

"What's he going to do?" I queried.

"He's had a good look at the room with that torch of his. I can't make out what his game is."

"He seems to be having a squint at the catch."

"You're right," said George. "I believe he's coming through that window after all. Well, he'll have the same job I had to get in."

"What can we do?" I groaned. "Have we to stand here and wait for this blighter, whoever he is, to come in and cop us? Can't we do something about it?"

"No," said George abruptly. "Lie low just now. If he runs into us, well, whoever gets in the first swipe wins. But I'm desperately curious to know what he wants in here. If it's Seymore, why the blazes is he housebreaking into his own place?"

"Did you hear that!" I whispered, gripping my companion's arm. "That was the catch!"

"I heard it," said George tersely. "Back in here! He should be inside in half a second."

We slipped into the middle of the room. I was still clutching his arm, and he led me across to the window.

"Get behind these curtains," he whispered; "it's safest there. One at each side, up against the wall. I'd rather be standing upright on my pins if I've got to swipe anybody! Are you all right?"

"Right as rain," I muttered, but did not feel it. My own instinct would have been to select a less obvious hiding-place, but as the moments passed I realized the wisdom of George's judgment. It was just about the only hiding-place! Even if the intruder parted the curtains and looked out of the window he wouldn't see us; the stuff that concealed us was thick and heavy; we were right out of the window alcove, standing close against the wall, one on each side; and unless we made a move and gave away our presence, to prod the curtains was the only way to discover us. That he was an ordinary burglar I began to be morally certain; for there was no sound from the next room; and the opening of the window and his



movements must have been performed with professional skill. Then the tail of my eye caught a white glare of light on the wall where the folds of the curtain hung. I don't know how George felt, with that beam directed on the draperies that were our sole protection against either the crash of a loaded cudgel or a revolver bullet ; but for me at any rate it was a moment of tense and racking discomfort. Our only chance to escape his detection was to stand as motionless as statues. The slightest quiver, and his eye must leap upon the movement in the dazzle of that remorseless beam. I did not dare to breathe. It was a matter only of waiting and of trusting that, by some wonderful fall of luck, we would pass unnoticed in the room. The light ran up and down. He must have been standing in the doorway, taking a survey, and his eye located the window-curtains where we stood hidden. Then the light was flicked away to more important objects. We were safe—for the moment ! How long we were to remain in that beatific state depended on his next action. In the room through my curtain I could hear nothing. If he were moving about, he was achieving it with singular silence : which meant that he was no careless amateur at the job, and moreover he had come shod and prepared for this expedition.

Quite two minutes must have passed in this attitude of suspense, with no sign of the intruder's whereabouts or hint of his business. I began to wonder whether he had retreated into the sitting-room, and I was about to venture moving my head to see if I could catch a glimpse of his light, when there came to my ears a soft rustle, followed by another and another. I located the sound. He was scratching behind the curtain in the recess across the room. Then there was a sharp tap, and I heard a soft exclamation ; he had come upon the cabinet. There was silence for an instant, then another rustling noise, which I knew

to be the sound of the curtain and clothes being brushed back, as I myself had brushed them out of my way not half an hour before. Was this, then, the object of his quest? If he were intent upon the cabinet, the side of the room where we were would be in darkness: I softly moved, and looked round the border of my hiding-place.

His electric lamp was on a chair. The beam bore upon the cabinet, and as I looked I heard the muffled jingle of metal, and a hand inserted a key in the keyhole on the panelling. So it was the bureau he wanted after all! The key was withdrawn, another inserted, and the man bent forward in his eagerness. To my astonishment I saw that a black mask concealed his features, and a dark muffler was round his chin. At this it was difficult to repress my astonishment. It was obviously not Seymore: why should Seymore come into his own rooms in this fashion? But the disguise was impenetrable: not for nothing had that mask and muffler been adjusted.

The white nervous hands were busy at the lock, key after key slipping in and out again. Then there was the faint rasp of a small file; the hands worked for an instant with the key in the hole; than the file again. He was indefatigable. I watched him, enthralled. It was an object-lesson in patience and skill; and suddenly his efforts were rewarded. There was a click, and the stranger had lifted back the lid and was regarding the stuffed pigeon-holes of the desk.

He swiftly lifted his light from the chair, and plucked out the contents of the largest compartment. The thin fingers fluttered among the papers, and replaced them. Pigeon-hole after pigeon-hole was treated in the same way: always the contents were stuffed back with a quick petulance. Here was indeed no ordinary housebreaker! There was some definite object in his search. What

object? What other object than my own? A sudden thrill ran down my spine, and I sweated coldly. The leather case I had found: where was it? What had I done with it? Then I could have laughed harshly. For the case was in my hand, clutched against my side! In the excitement of the sudden intrusion, I had held on to it unconsciously. I watched him exultantly as he went through the drawers, running his eye through the papers, only to pack them back in their places. I think he must have searched that cabinet from top to bottom in less than half the time I took, and with that he was more careful and thorough. As he completed the last drawer, and stood up, as if puzzled, I knew for certain he had come for the leather case I was pressing safely against my side. He stood thus for a while, looking carefully over the cabinet on every side, as if to hunt for a secret receptacle. Then he closed the drawers, shut down the lid, and, kneeling on the floor, put his hand underneath. Not satisfied apparently, he opened the lid again and pulled out the bottom drawer and set it beside him on the floor, exploring inside the cabinet with his torch. He seemed positive it should contain something which he had not found. Then, as I thought, with great reluctance he locked it up, bundled the clothes about it as he had found them, and drew the chintz hangings with a low grunt of dissatisfaction. I withdrew my head into the concealing folds of the curtain and waited in trepidation for his next move. If it were his intention to search the room for what he had failed to find in the cabinet, it was certain he would stumble upon us.

Again there fell a silence in the room. It was not that the curtain muffled the sounds, but that his movements were like those of a cat. Whether he was at my side or searching in some far corner I could not estimate. At any moment I expected his groping hands to clutch me. When

danger is close at hand, within a few yards or feet, the strain is intensified a thousand times if one's eyes are blindfold : to *see* it coming nearer is sufferable ; one can prepare to meet the shock ; one can gauge the situation and prepare for action : but to *imagine* it approaching, to be in the flaming suspense of uncertainty, is a sensation almost intolerable. In my hip-pocket was the automatic, but my right hand was gripping the leather case, and I did not dare to risk changing it, in case the motion revealed our presence. If he came on us, it would be a case of close quarters, and I had found my fists quite serviceable weapons on more than one occasion in the past.

Then my eye caught the light again. This time it was receding ; just a glow on the wall, and then it faded. Had he switched it out for some reason ? Or had he gone into the sitting-room ? I waited, while a palpitating minute passed, then another, and another. And then there was a click, and George's whisper broke the silence of the bedroom :

"He's gone ! That's the window fastened behind him."

The pent-up breath rushed out of my body in one long gasp.

"I feel like that too," chuckled George, puffing with relief.

"I wouldn't come through that again," I said, "for anything you like to name. Every blessed minute I expected to be stuck like a pig through that curtain."

"I wouldn't have missed it for worlds," said George. "By jove, old lad, you've got copper wires instead of nerves. You had the worst of it standing over on that side, with his torch almost in your face when he came in. I tell you, I had my little gun ready—I expected you to give a yell and go for him in sheer desperation any moment. Isn't it a rummy business altogether ? "

As we talked we had entered the sitting-room and George was peering through the window.

"Has he gone clear away, do you think?"

George nodded. "We'll give him a few minutes, then clear out too. Did you get anything from the cabinet?"

"Rather! And I'll swear this is what that chap was after!" I shoved the leather case into his hands.

"Good man!" said George quietly. "Well, as it turned out, we weren't any too soon. Half an hour later and that Smart Alec we've been watching would have been off like a rocket with this in his hot little hand. It's merely a piece of good luck you've got this thing, whatever's in it. And now we'll bow our way out from Mr. Seymore's august apartments."

He unfastened and slowly pulled up the window, closing it behind him; and following his instructions, I kept watch on the lawn while he clicked home the catch—an operation, which, he explained, was much more difficult than that of opening it. But his ex-cracksman servant in France had not given dug-out demonstrations in vain, as George explained, with a chuckle when he joined me. We slipped into the bushes, dropped over the wall, and made tracks across the dark fields for home.

"A good stiff whisky, that's the food for Ronny," murmured George, as he poured us out a couple of peps. "Well, my son, I hope you're satisfied with your night's work."

I flung the leather case on the table, lit a cigarette, and sank down on the rickety sofa. "We've stolen a very successful march on friend Seymore," I sighed. "That's something anyway."

"Yes, and more than that!" cried George. "We've got in before that gentleman in the mask, which seems to me even more to the point: Seymore may be—he is—a very clever gentleman. He imagines he's pulling your leg



all round the ring. He imagines you think him a shining paragon of all the virtues. And for Heaven's sake let him continue in that delusion. But the fact emerges that somebody else is trying to double-cross Seymore ! ”

“ By jove, you're right,” I exclaimed. “ Somebody else who's interested in my affairs—somebody who's possibly smarter than Seymore. Did you see his slick work at that cabinet ? ”

“ He only made one mistake,” smiled George. “ He didn't look behind the window-curtains ! ” George took a deep pull at his tumbler and picked up the leather case from the table, weighing it in his hand. “ It's heavy,” he exclaimed. “ There's a metal box of some sort inside the leather.”

“ Open it, and let's see what we can make of it,” I suggested, getting to my feet, and leaning over the table. George unbuckled the belts, and drew back the tough leather. A little flat metal box was revealed, a box that was like a miniature safe for strength.

“ This explains its weight,” murmured George. “ Have you got a key for this among the wonderful collection you got from the lawyer man ? ”

I produced every key I had received ; but of the few that were near the proper size, none made the slightest impression on the lock.

“ Perhaps the old laird didn't carry the key for this with him,” I suggested. “ But I'll swear it wasn't anywhere in that cabinet. I went through every inch of it.”

“ Probably had a nook in his library where he kept it,” agreed George. “ Especially if this case has something of real importance in it. What do you expect to find, Ronny ? ”

“ Heaven alone knows. One thing only we are certain of, and that is this. Several people are so dead keen on collaring it and getting me away from this place, that one



of them will go the length of attempted murder for it. That's enough to be going on with. It's valuable all right, even though it only gives us a clue to what they're after."

"There's only one thing that will open it, barring the key, and that's a metal-saw. About an hour's hard work and I'd have the end clean off. What do you say about it? Shall we wait till the morning, and go through that library with a fine tooth-comb for the key? Or will I buzz out to the car and see if there's a metal-saw in the tool-kit?"

"The saw by all means!" I cried. "Having done so much, let's finish the job now."

"Right you are." George was on his feet. "Keep your ears open while I'm gone. You can't be too careful when you're dealing with gentlemen in black masks. Chuck us that electric torch."

George slipped out, and I occupied the time of his absence by trying to fathom what the flat metal box contained. I turned over in my mind all the events that had a bearing on it. By the time George returned, I was still as far at sea as ever. Only the box itself could yield up its secret.

"It's a wash-out, old man," was George's announcement. "Don't have such a thing as a metal-saw in my tool-kit. We'll have to wait till morning. These farm people of yours have to jigger about a lot with machinery—we should be able to get a metal-saw from the foreman."

"Hard luck," I said, disappointed. "I don't suppose there's much good tackling it with a poker? Couldn't we get a chisel in and prise it open?"

George shook his head. "You won't bust this with a chisel, old thing. I'm afraid we've got to wait till morning now. Shove it in a safe place for the night. Not that I anticipate any attempts at collaring it, because nobody

knows we've got it. But all the same I'd take no risks. And now we'll have one last drink before turning in."

And George yawned a yawn of sublime innocence, as one who has performed some commonplace task of an old routine, and performed it passing well.

## CHAPTER X

### WHAT MARGET SAID AT THE STILE

THERE was a mist next morning on the hills when I strolled out of doors, but a blazing sun was lifting it. The day was full of promise ; it went to your head like wine ; and it was in high spirits that I crowed gaily over George at half-past ten as I sat down to breakfast dressed and shaved, while he was tousled and wrapped in an aged and well-beloved dressing-gown.

“ Laugh, you blighter, laugh ! ” grunted George. “ Just because I caught you on the hop yesterday, you make a point of catching me to-day. That’s what I call a vindictive spirit. Look here, by the time we’ve finished brekker it’ll be eleven o’clock, and I’ve got to shave and dress yet. You’d better pop along to the farm for that saw yourself, while I’m making myself presentable.”

“ And have you sneaking back to bed as soon as my back is turned ! ” I sneered in mock derision. “ No, no, my son ; I’ll stand over you while you shave, and we’ll set out together hand in hand. You’re the technical expert in this stunt ; you’ve got to come and see that we get the correct article. I’d probably return with a cross-cut saw over my shoulder, and you’d have hysterics. So suck up that coffee, my lad, and get a move on.”

“ Ronny,” he said, after a while, as he lit a pipe and stretched out his pyjama-clad legs, “ my fingers have been itching all night to get to the inside of that little steel box of yours. I do honestly believe we’ll find it explains everything. I think it’s a singularly pleasant sensation to be on the tiptoe of a discovery.”

"It depends on the discovery," I remarked. "How do you know that it'll be pleasant?"

"I feel it in my bones," said George. "Well, here goes." And he poured himself out shaving water with a groan. "Man isn't meant to dress on a day like this; he's meant to lubber about naked in the sun. For your sake, old tyrant, I will cut my chin and oil my waving locks."

"It's after eleven," I roared. "Get on." And it was half-past by the time we left the cottage and made up the lane. Jessie met us at the back door of the Home Farm, wiping her hands on her apron, as if peeling potatoes were an action not even to be hinted at in the presence of lairds.

"Forsyth, sir?" she repeated with a long face, "not ten minutes gone, sir. Called over the moor, sir, to look at some sheep. He said he would be back about three. I'll send after him this minute," she added, calling across the farm-yard to a sturdy farm-wench.

"Not at all," I put in. "I want a chat with him about things generally, and I'll be back early this evening and have a good hour with him. Meantime I wonder if we could borrow a tool from Forsyth's tool-box?"

"Welcome," said Jessie. "Will ye no' just come round to the tool-shed and help yourself?"

The tool-shed was round the corner; and George ran his eye along the racks, then shook his head. "Not what I want here," he said.

We thanked Jessie, and turned our faces homewards.

"We'll pop along to St. Eildon in the car after lunch," said George, "and borrow one from a motor garage. Then I'll be sure of getting one the right size. I wonder if Seymore's back yet, by the way?"

His query was answered almost immediately. A voice hailed me by name over the wall. I turned. The smiling

countenance of Mr. Seymore was blandly blocking the gap between two bushes.

"Come in, come in!" he cried. "Delighted to see you!" The face disappeared, and his feet rattled on the pebbles of the garden path as he toddled to the gate.

"I'm dying to meet him," whispered George, as we retraced our steps.

"Charmed, charmed," exclaimed Mr. Seymore when I introduced George. "You're just in time for a drink."

"Whew!" said George, "we've just finished brekker."

"What!" cried Mr. Seymore. "In a few minutes it will be twelve o'clock. Noon! *L'heure d'apéritif!* Breakfast or no breakfast I insist on you allowing me to mix you a cocktail. A very small, but, I hope, a very pleasant one."

He waved us into the sitting-room, and whatever else he could do, he could emphatically mix a cocktail. I am no great fist at cocktails myself, but I knew enough to realize that Seymore's touch was masterly.

"I learned that one at Singapore," he chuckled, producing cigarettes. "Delighted that you both approve. I think it's most good of you—most neighbourly—dropping in like this. If you've nothing better to do, why not drop in every fine morning and keep me up to scratch in mixing these pleasant concoctions? Without somebody to appreciate 'em, you know, one grows careless. I can give you a different sort of mixture every day for—let me see—one month! Why don't you be seated?"

We thanked him appreciatively. The situation tickled me, because the whip-hand was ours. Whatever game Seymore was playing against me, he had no idea I was watching his moves. His ignorance on that point was my strongest bulwark. Another mark in my favour was the amazing fact, which we had discovered last night, that Seymore had some crafty enemy who was watching him

and waiting his chance to scoop the pool directly Seymore had it filled. On the other hand, against these points I had to place the desolating fact that I was in the dark about their object. But that, I felt, was bound to emerge soon from the mists that enwrapped it; patience and unwearied vigilance would be the dispersing factors.

“And now,” said Seymore, “we’ll have another.” I, for one, did not protest, as much for the added opportunity of contact with the man, as for the niceness of his skill in combining small quantities of exotic liquids. George’s tongue was whirring like a reaping-machine, and I was well satisfied when we strolled with our glasses into the garden and relapsed on chairs in the sunlight. George was not the lad to let grass grow under his feet; nor was he the one to give away one iota of knowledge which in his most sane moment he would wish to retain; and I saw that the half hour spent thus in idle talk would not be wasted.

I lay back in my chair and listened. George had led the talk rather cleverly to bear upon Eastern topics, and I remembered that Seymore had described himself as an Eastern merchant. Seymore was relating several amusing experiences, and George, in the ingenuous tone of one who has but a smattering of knowledge on the subject in hand, was asking questions and spurring our host to further narratives. All at once Seymore held up his hand and listened, then jumped to his feet with a cry, and crossed the lawn.

“Ah!” he cried, looking over the wall. “Good morning, good morning.”

“Curse it,” whispered George. “Why didn’t he keep on!” He winked meaningly through a cloud of smoke. “Who’s he hailing?”

“Come in, come in!” Seymore was calling. “I insist!” He was pattering towards the gate, which he swung back,



and with a laugh made a cavalier gesture like a courtier of old bowing in the queen. With a basket over her arm, Marget slowly entered the garden.

Startled, I sprang to my feet, cap in hand, with George behind me. Marget seemed no less nonplussed at the sight of us, and she paused and looked at Seymore in perplexity. "I—I didn't know you had guests," she murmured.

"Come along, they won't eat you," smiled Seymore jovially. "This is Mr. Drysdale, our new laird and, for the time being, my honoured guest. This is Mr. Collier. Gentlemen, our little village maid has come for eggs, but I am sure the eggs can wait."

"I have already met Mr. Drysdale," said Marget, "and Mr. Collier."

"Oh, yes, we've already been to the Manse," I put in, and a question swept across my mind which I could not answer: Had Marget mentioned our first meeting to Seymore? Had she told him how she had directed us to the Hall that night? We had given her no indication that we had left the main road and penetrated into the house; but nevertheless if she had told him of our meeting and how we had gone towards the Hall, there must be some suspicion in his mind that George and I had been the disturbers of the peace in the library. The fact that we had been on the road that night was of course no proof, especially if he had reason to suspect anyone else of the interruption, but it would add to his tactics a new element which I did not relish.

Seymore's eyebrows went up. "Oh, so you've met the Shaws?" I could have sworn his surprise was unfeigned: if it was indeed a simulation, the man was the cleverest actor I had met. He was patting Marget's shoulder in an avuncular fashion. "Splendid! Then since we all know each other, we'll sit down and bask. It is not permitted

that the maid from the Manse consume a cocktail, but may I bring a nice cool drink——”

“No, thank you,” said Marget, shaking her head. “I’m not a bit thirsty really, and I must get back quick with my eggs.”

“Miss Marget makes a beautiful omelet,” chaffed Seymore, lighting a cigarette. “You must wangle an invitation for lunch at the Manse, and I promise you a treat.”

“I’m sure they can both come to lunch any day they like. Dad would be delighted.”

“And her cress sandwiches!” cried Seymore.

“They can come to tea too,” smiled Marget.

“Better still,” said Seymore, “you will all come to tea with *me*, if Miss Marget will make cress sandwiches for us!”

Marget’s eyes rested on me for a second in doubt. “I don’t think I ought,” she began. “You men will want to talk——”

“Carried unanimously?” cried Seymore, waving his cigarette.

“Thanks very much,” said George quickly. “We’ll be delighted, won’t we, Ronny?”

“Rather,” I agreed. “Specially for the cress sandwiches!”

“We won’t have tea here,” continued Seymore, with an enthusiasm quite boyish. “I want to do a water-colour up in the hills this afternoon. We’ll have a picnic.”

“I’m a dab hand at a fire,” said George. “You can potter with your paints, Miss Shaw can give Ronny a brief lecture on the flora and fauna of the Lammermuirs, and I will make myself into a coal black mammy with the tea-kettle. I will pinch some of the water from your water-colours to wash myself with afterwards.”

"We'll go up the stream," cried Seymore, "and you can tub in it if you like."

"I must really get my eggs," pleaded Marget rising. "Thank you very much, Mr. Seymore."

"Do you go back by the lane?" I asked Marget.

"As far as the stile."

"Then we'll walk so far with you," I announced. "We're just going too."

We waited for her at the gate, and Seymore waved us an revoir. "I'll look for you quite early. Two o'clock!" he cried.

"Interesting beggar," murmured George. "I never thought he was such a jovial cove."

"He is—very, at times," said Marget. "But I really don't think I should have accepted his invitation. I don't know what Dad will say. Not that we aren't friendly with him, or anything like that, but you see Dad and I always go everywhere together."

"Look here," I said, "let me nip back and tell him Mr. Shaw would like to come as well."

"He couldn't come in any case," said Marget. "He's got to visit some people in the congregation. There's one thing on my mind, Mr. Drysdale. Do you mind if I speak freely before Mr. Collier?"

"I have no secrets from old George," I laughed.

"Even his very banking account," said George. "His balance at the moment, I may say, is a disgrace. It—Hullo, sorry." George relapsed into silence after a glance at Marget's troubled face.

"I hope there's nothing wrong," I said seriously.

"No, no, nothing," answered Marget quickly. "Just this. You see, Mr. Seymore has the knack of making friends very quickly. You'll like him most awfully in a social way. But I do hope you won't mention to him what Dad told you that first night in the Manse—I mean, the

time he warned you not to come and live at Bracken-bridge."

"Good heavens, no!" I exclaimed. "That was told me in confidence."

"I'm so glad," said Marget, relief shining in her eyes. "It was stupid of me worrying just now. But I was quite taken aback—I didn't know you had made friends with Mr. Seymore. You see, it would never do for anyone to know what Dad had said to you—don't you see how it would look queer?"

"Your father said something about old Mr. Drysdale's death," I began.

"Don't, don't," cried Marget, her eyes half closing in pain. "I'd rather hear nothing about it. I've never asked Dad anything about it, and if I did he wouldn't tell me. But I know by Dad's manner, and one or two other things, that there's been something queer—something horrible in the air for some time. I've only to look at poor Dad, and see the state his health is in with worry, and I swear I want us both to run away—to go anywhere just to leave it all behind. Now we must part, for I go over this stile. Au revoir till the afternoon!"

I stepped forward to help her with the basket, and when she was half-way over, I heard her voice coming down to me in a whisper. The words were slow and soft, but they registered themselves incisively on my brain:

*"For God's sake, be careful—to-day!"*

The next instant she was over the stile, and swinging with her easy stride down the footpath.

## CHAPTER XI

### MY EXPERIENCE AT THE GREEN POOL

I DO not know who was the more surprised, George or I. The words had been whispered—passionately whispered in a voice full of womanly fear and pleading—but the tones of her voice had been low, obviously not to conceal them from George, but rather to make them the more incisive. As it was, George heard her clearly, and when I turned to him he was gazing down the footpath Marget had taken with a face that was a plastic study in astonishment.

“Well now that beats the band,” he exclaimed, finding his voice.

“What the blazes does she mean? ‘For God’s sake, be careful—to-day,’ she said.”

“It may mean a few things,” returned George, nodding slowly and ruminatively. “But I should say that the primary meaning is for you to keep a wary eye on friend Seymore. Ronny, she hates that man. I could see it this morning in every glance.”

“She appeared pally enough with him on the surface, at any rate. He was almost too familiar with her, I thought.”

“Quite; but to my mind she’s—well, to put it bluntly, she’s almost *afraid* of him.”

“I believe you’re right. To my mind she doesn’t want to come this afternoon, but because he asks her she forces herself to go. Surely she could have cooked up a dozen excuses for stopping at home!”

George let the point pass in tacit assent. When he

spoke again his mind had gone on a different tack : " There s one thing I was never quite certain of before, but I'm dead sure of it now. That girl knows nothing of what is going on behind the scenes, though, by jove, she must suspect a lot ! I believe she is absolutely sincere—a really decent sort—and knows no more than she says she does."

" I've been certain of that all along," I declared. " But there's one thing she doesn't tell us, and that is the whole truth about her father. I mean in his relations with Seymore. Are they merely casual acquaintances, or close friends, or deadly enemies ? Don't forget that time I saw her at Seymore's window in the Edinburgh hotel, and old Shaw making up the steps ! There must be something in it one way or the other."

" It's loyalty to her old man that keeps her mouth shut," said George. " One can well understand it. But I have a notion she's not quite sure how the land lies with her father, and is afraid of Seymore accordingly. Didn't she say she was afraid you mentioned to Seymore how old Shaw had tried to persuade you to keep away from Brackenbridge ? That looks as if there wasn't full confidence between Seymore and Shaw. Unless, of course, that impression was conveyed to us intentionally and she was bluffing—I don't mean consciously bluffing, but she might have been cleverly put up to it by old Shaw to make you think he had no use for Seymore."

I shook my head. " It's unlikely. I should say she said it off her own bat to save her father's skin in some way. She really doesn't want Seymore to know. I was dashed glad to hear her say it too."

" What do you mean ? "

" Why, if Seymore knew all about that interview, he would know we were in Brackenbridge that night !—he would know we were along that road to look at the Hall—and he'd have a half suspicion that you and I were the



blokes who shoved our noses into the library that night ! As it is, I'm certain now he hasn't the slightest inkling."

"By jove!" cried George. "You've hit it. You're correct. I had forgotten about that library business. Yes, we're safe enough on that score! Do you know, I'm quite eager to see friend Seymore again. I find him a most entertaining raconteur." George slashed off the head of a thistle as we passed. "He's also the cleverest liar in creation."

"What have you found out?"

"He says he's an Eastern merchant. Well, he's been to the East all right, but he's not an Eastern merchant, and never has been. I happen to have an uncle who's an Eastern merchant, and I lived with the old lad for a year before I went up to Cambridge. I kept blurting out silly questions to our friend, and even his best skill didn't always carry him through. So that's one illusion shattered. Mr. Seymore, our doughty host at this afternoon's picnic, is not what he says he is."

"But that doesn't prove it was he who tried to stick a knife in me the other night!" And I laughed grimly.

"It doesn't prove anything, except that he's not to be taken at his face value. What is he? What has he been? Well, perhaps that will emerge sooner than we think. Ah, I smell lunch!" As he spoke we arrived at the cottage door. "The goodly Jessie has been busy, and our friend's cocktails have given me a hunter's hunger."

It was Jessie's practice to dish up our lunch, and fly home to attend to the meal at the farm, leaving us to help ourselves. Before she went I told her our arrangements for tea, and she assured me her brother would be awaiting my pleasure at the farm-house when we returned in the evening.

"I wonder what sort of beggar Forsyth will turn out," I remarked when we were alone. "Seymore told me he was a surly blighter."

"Surly or not," said George, opening an excellent bottle of hock, "I'm glad he wasn't at hand when we went about that metal-saw. The less we say to anyone about a metal-saw or a steel box the better for our health. I meant to go to St. Eildon for a saw this afternoon, but to listen to Seymore for three hours is too interesting an occupation to miss. We can easily blow over to St. Eildon in the evening. Meantime, for heaven's sake plank that box in a safe place. Of course nobody knows we have it; but judging from last night's experience, you've fairly brought me to a district, old thing, where people seem to give full vent to their curiosity!"

I laughed, and toasted Marget with the wine.

"I was just waiting for that," said George, joining me. "You drag the poor lassie's name in at every turn. I don't think it's good for you to see so much of that fair maid!"

"And, by jove, she *is* fair!" I agreed. "In fact, I'd call her beautiful."

"I didn't say so," growled George. "I was referring to the colour of her hair."

"A light golden brown," I rhapsodized. "All beautiful golden squiggles. Violet-blue eyes always go well with golden hair."

"It's red," snapped George. "Red. Carroty. So shut up and swallow your lunch, or we'll be late for the august Mr. Seymore."

"I believe you've fallen for her yourself," I said, with a laugh. "You never mention her name at all—that's a sure symptom. Come on! Admit it's golden."

There was a long silence.

"Gold," said George slowly at length, his eyes vague

and distant in deep reflection. "Gold. Yes, I suppose—I suppose it probably is."

"What on earth are you talking about?" I exclaimed. "The colour. Her hair, I mean. I said it was golden."

"Sorry," said George with a start. "I was thinking of something else. I had an idea, that's all. Oh, her hair! My last word on that argument—carrots!"

We took our rods (but not baskets) with us up the hill, on the chance of an odd cast or two before tea. Seymore was in great high spirits, and Marget had never looked prettier. Seymore led the way with George, while the girl and I followed in the rear. If we fell far behind now and then, I am afraid it was my fault; for I was more intent on watching her eyes with their thousand changing expressions than on following hard on the heels of the others. Every time I looked at her hair and thought of George's denunciations of its tint, I wanted to run after him and punch his head.

In a pause of our happy-go-lucky talk, she referred to our meeting of the morning: "I told Dad I spoke to you about not mentioning to anyone the first talk he had with you. It took me some time to screw up my courage to do it," she added. "He's very difficult sometimes."

"And what did he say?" I queried.

"He was dreadfully angry. He asked me what right I had to interfere. He told me to keep my fingers out of the whole business."

"But surely you did it for his sake," I said. "Not that it was necessary, as I've explained."

"I told him I didn't want to interfere. He demanded to hear all I knew about Brackenbridge Hall and you, and of course I told him I know nothing. And then the poor old dear kissed me as if I were a kid, and apologized for his bad temper. You never saw such a sentimental scene. I

wept a bit, I'm afraid. But, oh, he is strange these days. I wish I knew what to make of him. I don't believe he sleeps a wink at night, pacing his bedroom floor, up and down, up and down ; it seems to go on for hours."

"He's got something on his mind," I said. "Have you any inkling what it is?"

Marget shook her head. "I wish I had!—though I don't suppose I could be of any help. And yet one never knows. If only he would share it with me, it might be a relief to him. I can't ask straight out—I daren't. Tell me," she said, after a moment's thought, "whether I'm right in this. I'm going to ask you a question. You were going to explain to me this morning what Dad hinted to you about Mr. Drysdale's death, and I stopped you. Well, that was cowardly of me to stop you—I've no right to stand back when Dad is somehow involved. Was this what he told you? Did he say that there was something queer about the old laird's death?" Margaret spoke the words as if she hated them.

"He did, but he said there was no proof of it, and I didn't put much stress on it myself. He used it as an argument why I shouldn't come and stay at the Hall."

"He did. Only as an argument?"

"Oh, he was upset about it all right, and said the old laird had been his best friend. But now you tell me this, Marget: Do you honestly think my safety is the only reason why he's keen I should clear out?"

Marget started. Her eyes opened, and she looked at me queerly. "Oh!" she said, with a catch in her breath, and stopped. Then her eyes filled with tears which she brushed back, and I saw her biting her lip. "I wish to heaven I knew!" she said quietly.

"It's Seymore," I said with sudden bitterness. "You'll find it has something to do with that man Seymore. What is your father's attitude towards him?"

"Hush!" said Marget quickly. "They're waiting for us at the dyke."

By this time we had reached the rising ground, and George and Seymore were sitting watching us, enjoying the midge-dispersing solace of a cigarette. As we drew near, George jumped to his feet. "Come on," he said to Seymore. "We won't interrupt those two, they seem much too interested."

I could see that George was anxious to continue their chat, and I gave them a good hundred yards' start before lifting our impedimenta over the dry-stone dyke, and mutely admiring the skill and grace with which Marget navigated its rough contour.

It crossed my mind that I should mention the occasion when I had seen her at Seymore's window in the Edinburgh Hotel, but decided to keep that back for the moment. To speak of it might look as if I were demanding an explanation, when after all it was none of my business, and Marget might freeze up altogether. I knew it had been an effort for her to confide in me as much as she had done, and I admired the racial reserve that had made her hold her tongue till she was quite certain I was a person she could trust. Even on the day I had told her I loved her, she had been reticent; and it was pleasant to me to think she had made me her confidant now.

We were on a steep cart-track, and suddenly she slipped her hand through my arm and let it rest there. Her gesture was sisterly and frank, performed without shyness or hesitation. But the subject of her father was dropped.

George and Seymore were awaiting us on a grassy knoll beside the stream, and the latter was arranging his slender easel to make a sketch of the hillside and glen as it widened out and sank into the rolling countryside beyond. George was propped up against a boulder, very comfortable, with his pipe alight. Marget and I dropped beside him on the

grass, and lazily watched Seymore adjust his sketching paraphernalia. At last he was satisfied, and turned to us with a smile.

"And now, my children," he cried, "you may play till tea-time."

"I said I was going to make the fire," said George, "and I'm jolly well going to make it."

"But you must let me gather the sticks," Marget interrupted.

"No such thing——" began George.

"You mustn't deprive her of it!" exclaimed Seymore. "She always gathers the sticks. You've no idea what a connoisseur she is at gathering sticks."

George got to his feet. "Right-ho! If people *will* insist on doing my work for me, why should I refuse? Miss Shaw, you're not a girl; you're a labour-saving device! Now I'm going to fish down this stream till it's time for me to return and strike the sacramental match."

"We'll cook your trout for tea," said Marget, with a smile.

"You're pretty safe," I told her. "I am going to fish up the burn, but I make no rash promises."

"Ronny is a crack at catching trees," said George. "Don't bother to gather those sticks, Miss Shaw; he'll bring you back enough branches to make a bonfire."

"Off you go then!" laughed Marget; "and don't be a minute later than half-past four."

We promised faithfully, and parted. The glen was narrow and rocky, with overhanging crags in places. In places too the hillside ran sheer up, with sheep-paths winding perilously among the trees and bushes. The stream was narrow and fast, opening into an occasional pool, shallow where the water emerged, but sloping to black depths at the distant end. Among the first dozen casts in one of these pools, I lost my tackle on the over-



hanging trees that crowded to the water's edge. Thanking Providence that George was not there to scoff, I fitted fresh tackle and proceeded upstream. It was very pleasant in that quiet glen with the soft rush of the water in my ears and the birds singing overhead; and above both noises I could hear the pounding of a distant waterfall farther up between the hills.

"That probably means a big pool," I said to myself, and decided to waste little time playing riskily (and unskillfully) beneath these rapacious branches. Soon the thunder of the waterfall grew louder; and after pushing through some dense bushes with my rod held high above my head, it burst into view, fifteen or twenty feet of white falling water. It seethed and churned between banks of steep rock, green and slimy with moss and spray, and it spread into a still deep pool, perhaps twenty yards across with the body of a tree lying drunkenly over one corner, and a ledge running round the margin just wide enough to give an adventurous angler foothold. I smoked placidly for half an hour, more asleep than awake, fishing at intervals when the fancy took me, but dreaming mostly. My thoughts, I may as well admit, ran largely on the strange intricacies of woman's nature: what man on earth ever yet understood a girl? And the more beautiful the girl, the more curious seemed to be her mental make-up! That's the cursed thing about it. The only treasure-trove I bore away from that pool was an unsubstantial one—namely, the thought that women are amazing creatures—for assuredly I took no fish. And, come to think of it, the reflection is not a very novel one either. The strumming of the waters had been like a veritable sleeping draught, and I came to myself with a jerk and with the impression that I'd better be moving on.

I cursed softly at the prospect of ploughing again through the dense bushes. Was there no other way out of this

cul-de-sac? I looked all around. My eye picked out an alternative route. It meant climbing about fifty feet up an almost perpendicular bank. But even that was a shorter way upstream than going back till I could get an easy path up to higher ground and then working round to meet the stream again above the pool. I glanced at my watch and whistled: there was no time to fish farther. I must get back at once, or be late for tea: which would look mighty rude, as if I preferred my sport, or the lack of it, before the fare of my host—to say nothing of Marget's cress sandwiches.

So I unloosed the tackle and, rolling it up, put it in my pocket-book. Reeling up the line, I unjointed the rod and slipped it into the brown waterproof cover. Then I made across the patch of pebbles and commenced my climb. The quickest way back, it was obvious, was not to blunder downstream over the rocks at the water's edge, but get up into high ground at once, which would cut off a considerable bend in the burn, and have a clear stroll down through the trees on the horizon above me.

The climb was a tougher job than I had anticipated. My rod was the trouble, for I had to pull myself by occasional tufts of grass and jutting corners of rock, digging my toes into the loose earth that spurted at a touch. A birch tree now and then, and an odd hazel bush, gave support and made the going easier. I paused and looked down, my arm round a sapling; and the dark green pool with its booming waterfall seemed a dreadful drop. I shuddered to think of some angler slipping here in the dark and falling into that hideous cavern; and with considerably more care than I had used in starting, I tackled the last twenty feet of the climb. As I got my knee upon a rock, and my hand on the tough curling root of a tree above me, I heard a shot across the glen.

"I should have brought a gun instead of this,"

I grumbled to myself, as the rod again got in my way. "I'd at least have bagged a few wood-pigeons."

Another shot went off, and the birds rose wheeling and crying above me. The shooting seemed rather near for my taste, and I put on speed. After the same interval there was a third shot ; but an instant before the reverberation, there had been a hiss in the leaves of a tree a few yards distant. The blighter was potting over at birds on *this* side of the glen ! I stopped and looked across. There was no sign of him. His attention must be drawn to my presence, and that right speedily ! I shouted and waved my rod. Almost it seemed in answer, the loose earth was flicked up in a spray beside me, and a fourth shot crackled sharply.

I swore angrily. Then of a sudden it was borne in upon me, with a surge of something very near to terror, that the man across the glen was perfectly well aware of my presence : that he was, indeed, taking deliberate aim at me ! I slipped quickly behind a hazel bush and made an observation. Not a trace of him was to be seen. Birds were still rising in clumps and circling up the glen ; but apart from them everything was deadly still ; and the incessant drone of the water was all that broke the silence. I wondered whether he were finished, and I got my answer pat. For the gun barked again, and a chip of rock was splintered from the boulder above my head. So he wasn't firing shot—he was loosing off bullets at me ! And a wild panic seized my limbs. The hazel bush was less than no protection—it was, indeed, a target. Without more ado, I leapt at the boulder above me, and, setting my teeth, made for the ragged edge of the bank above in a burst of desperation.

I can never forget the few seconds that followed. They were charged with all the turbulent elements that haunt the dreadful margin between life and death. For I knew

that any instant he might find the mark he was aiming for in the grim and stark brutality of cold blood. Even a bullet in the leg, and I should go hurtling down what amounted to a precipice, down into the devouring waters below. I don't know how many shots followed me as I clambered upwards; but as I drew nearer the top they came quicker, and seemed only to miss me—in some wild providence—by inches. I am vague about what followed.

I thought for a fleeting moment he had hit me, because I knew I was slipping and falling. I thought moreover he had got me in some vital place. The ground went through my fingers, and my feet no longer gripped. I knew vaguely that I was smashing through leaves and branches; and then there was a jarring shock. I closed my eyes in pain, and opened them experimentally, not knowing what to expect. I saw that I was jammed perilously between a birch tree and the bank, and looking upwards gathered in an emotionless way that I must have slipped and fallen a dozen feet and had been saved by this slender tree trunk. At the same moment I heard a faint splash below, and I realized my fishing-rod was no longer in my hand. It was only by absurd luck that I had not gone down with it, and this thought jolted me suddenly to my senses.

I do not suppose I lay there against the bank for longer than a few seconds before I was on my feet again. This time there was no thought of climbing. To get down into the shelter of the glen was my only hope of salvation. At any instant the evil zip of a bullet might sing in my ear. And blindly I took my first leap in that wild helter-skelter descent. Sometimes slipping on my back, sometimes with toes dug in and sliding face downwards, often jumping for bushes and trees beneath me, taking furious risks when the slightest error of direction would send me into space, I steered my furious course. Always the tail of my eye was on the green pool lipping the sleek rocks far below, and my

ear was held by the malevolent hint of death humming in the waterfall. With a gasp I shot safely down the last twenty feet, and sat up on a tiny shelf of shingle. Floating a few feet away at the edge of the pool was my fishing-rod. I lost no time in snatching it up and making for the kindly shelter of the bushes.

I must have gone a good mile up that water. When I arrived back at the grassy patch by the burnside, tea was already started.

## CHAPTER XII

### THE LEATHER CASE

“ **B**Y jove, look at Ronny ! ”

These were the first words that greeted me, and George gazed at me blankly from his comfortable position on the ground.

“ What’s wrong with me ? ” I demanded.

“ Why you’re so white about the gills—you look as if you’d seen a ghost.”

“ Nonsense,” I laughed, observing Seymore eyeing me.

“ What rot ! ”

George pointed a finger at me. “ And look at your togs ! ” he exclaimed. “ Have you been through a pulp machine or what ? ”

I glanced down. Sure enough there was a triangular rent in my jacket ; two buttons were missing ; there was a large rip down my left knee ; and on the soft frayed edges of the cloth an ominous red stain was showing. I heard Marget give a little cry, and in a trice she was dipping my handkerchief in the stream. I was imperiously commanded to sit down while she bathed my bruised knee ; and I realized it was with difficulty she seemed to be holding herself in restraint. Her fingers were trembling, and her lips were pale.

“ Have you been having a mill with somebody, old man ? ” demanded George. “ Did you bump into a poacher by any chance ?—I suppose you promptly made a noise like a Scotch laird and pitched into him. If so, he seems to have done a bit of pitching too.”

“ Nothing of the sort,” I scoffed. “ Everything was as



peaceful as a church. I was simply scrambling up a bank when my hand slipped, that's all. I came a bit of a purler. It's easy to cut yourself about a bit somersaulting down a bank." It may have been imagination, but I thought I saw a look of quick relief in Marget's eyes.

"Ah, these somersaults!" sighed George. "I used to do 'em myself when I was young. I tell you, I believe it's all a put-up job myself. You'll find Ronny has carefully dinged his knee so that these hands shall bathe it! I think you've given him all the attention that is good for him, Miss Shaw. If you don't take your tea pretty quick, Ronny, there will be none left, I promise you."

I had been watching Seymore carefully, but he did not turn a hair.

"Have a cress sandwich," he cried with a chuckle. "I guarantee that after two applications you'll feel a new man. But tell me—what do you think of my new water-colour? Another afternoon with a light like this, and I'll have it finished."

Marget had made my handkerchief into a neat bandage, and while she was pouring out my tea, I stepped over to his easel with interest. I know little about art, but it seemed to me, as I looked at his half-finished sketch, that the man who made it was no fool at the game. There seemed to be a slickness and sureness in his handling, and some rocks in the foreground that he had worked up were really excellent.

I had half suspected that his sketching had been purely imaginary—a mere blind—but here was tangible evidence that he could paint!

"I like it," I said frankly. "It would be most interesting to see it finished. What else are you good at besides mixing colours and cocktails?"

"Sit down with that leg," commanded Marget. "Your knee will stiffen if you're not careful. Remember you're an invalid for the rest of this picnic."

Nor was I allowed to help in the subsequent washing up. Marget insisted that I should not hurry on the way home, and while George and Seymore disappeared from view, Marget and I dawdled slowly downwards over the quiet fields. It was only after an inward battle that I refrained from relating to her my experience in the glen. But I realized that prudence was imperative until I knew the precise position of her father in the scheme of tangled events, and I chimed in with her friendly chatter. At the Home Farm we parted, Marget declaring that she would send along old Kirsty, the Manse maid, that evening with lint for my knee; and I beat a tattoo on Jessie's door with the butt-end of my fishing-rod.

The little creature came out, all smiles as usual. "He's waiting for you, sir," she nodded. "Come right into the office."

It was my first meeting with my factor; and I was eager to meet the man and to estimate whether we should get on well together. Forsyth, who was busy writing, jumped up from his desk when I entered. He was a tall powerful man, stout, with a heavy, deeply-lined, rather yellowish face, and small, rather unpleasant black eyes. His hair was grey and thinning on the temples. But it was his expression—the look in his eyes, the hang of his mouth—that was more striking than any single feature. Altogether the effect was by no means prepossessing, and Seymore's description of his "surliness" recurred appositely in my mind. Yet, I reflected, if this had been the only man who could stay as factor to my dead relative for years, while others had lasted but a few months, there must be something in him, some vein of rugged strength or of

shrewd diplomacy. I shook hands. His greeting was reticent. It occurred to me that he was summing me up just as carefully as I was weighing him.

"I'm sorry if ye were wanting to see me before, sir, but I've been ready to come at your call." His voice was low and growling, and though the words were apologetic there was little apology in his tone.

"It's quite all right," I replied. "I have not properly settled down yet, and there's been nothing particular for me to see you about."

"The books are all here," said Forsyth. "Ye can look at them any time ye like, sir. If I'm not here at any time, ye'll kindly ask my sister Jessie to show ye in."

I was, of course, a complete novice as far as the business side of an estate was concerned, and I said so frankly.

"That's right, sir," said Forsyth, "but ye'll find ye'll easy get the hang of the books. If they're kept up to date, they'll no' go far wrong. Most of the revenue, of course, is frae feu-duties in the village. See, here's the map of your estate, sir." He turned to a large ordnance survey that was pinned to a board above the mantelpiece.

And as I looked at him, my heart jumped to my mouth. Where had I seen that back and these shoulders before—the thick neck, and that tilted set of the head?

The answer came to me clear and unmistakable—Forsyth was the man with Seymore, in the library of the Hall, on my first night in Brackenbridge!

He was concentrated on the map, his thick black-rimmed finger-nail tracing the boundaries; and I was mightily thankful he did not see me at that moment, or he might have discovered the dismay that must have been plainly showing on my face. Quickly I recovered my composure;

so that when he had finished, and turned round to me once more, I was able to put a question to him in a tone of unconcern.

“Isn’t there some more land besides that?” I asked. “Mr. Blair, the lawyer, said something to me about a few hundred acres up in the hills.”

“This map doesn’t show it, sir,” said Forsyth. “But ye’re quite right. There’s three hundred acres a few miles up in the Lammermuirs. It includes the hill called Black Edge.” He took an ordinary contour map from a drawer and unfolded it. “It’s separated from your Brackenbridge estate,” he explained, “and it’s little use to us at all. The far corner of it is let for grazing, and I graze a pickle sheep on the rest of it myself.”

“Aren’t there some old tumble-down buildings on it?” I queried, more to keep the conversation going, than for any particular information I desired. “Do you use them for anything?”

“Aye, there’s old farm buildings near the top of Black Edge, sir,” nodded Forsyth. “It’s quite a wee place, and I was going to knock it down a year ago, and cart down the stones for dry-stane dykes, but we made some money out of them in another way. A man came along—an invalid fellow he seemed to be—and said he was looking for summer quarters up in the hills. He explained he’d come across the buildings at Black Edge, and he said he thought he could make them habitable enough for him. Well, the end of it was, that he rented them and the five-acre field that’s round them, and agreed to do his own repairs to the farm-house.”

“Good business,” I said approvingly.

“Aye, and it was gey tumble-down I can tell ye, sir, but I believe he’s made two or three rooms quite respectable. I had a letter from him a month ago saying the place seemed to suit his health, and he would like

to build himself a bungalow there in time for next summer."

"Is he living there now?" I asked.

"I couldna say, sir," said Forsyth. "It's more than likely, though he's just as much away, I believe, as there. His home is in London, though I'm told he has to spend every winter in the south of France. It's his chest that troubles him. I've only seen him twice, but he seems a nicely spoken gentleman, and he pays his rent very regular. Which is more than I can say about some doon in the village. I'm afraid I haven't a very good name wi' some of them, but ye've got to be hard, sir, or ye'd never get the books to balance. What with this feu hung over for another half year, and that one three months late, and old Mr. Drysdale being a difficult gentleman to deal wi', if ye'll excuse me being plain, sir, I don't wonder a lot of the factors before me bundled up and went."

"You seem to have kept things together pretty well," I remarked.

"Na," said Forsyth. "It's been impossible to do that. The place is going doon, sir. It should be clearing a couple of thousand a year instead of six or eight hundred. Now wi' a pickle money spent here and there in the right way we'll make things hum again, sir. Ye'll excuse me talking like this—I've no right to take for granted that ye want me to stop on."

"Don't let that disturb you," I said with a laugh. "When I find anything to grumble at, I'll be quick enough to say so."

"Thank ye kindly, sir. Then in two or three days I'll be troubling ye to give me an hour or so. There's one or two odd things ye must give your decision on. And thank ye, again, sir."

I left Forsyth with mingled feelings. I felt there was something likeable about this great lumbering sour-faced



man, something likeable in spite of the fact that his presence in the library that night marked him down as a potential enemy. The distrust and even dislike I had noticed in his eye at the beginning of our interview had faded by the end, and I had the impression that as far as business went I saw no reason to doubt I would get on well enough with Forsyth. But he was an associate of Seymore and obviously a gentleman to watch.

George was still chatting to Seymore at the white gate when I went round the corner of the house, and thanking him for his hospitality and our first pleasant introduction to the foothills of the Lammermuirs, we bade him good evening and made for home.

"So your man Forsyth was Seymore's pal that night?" said George with a whistle, when I told him. "They must be very thick, these two. Didn't Seymore tell you he seldom saw Forsyth at all—hated his ill-nature and kept clear of him? Well, the more I know of our Mr. Seymore the more my admiration increases. He's a marvel, that man. Whether his yarns are true or not, they are brilliant. I tell you he knows something about everybody—the political crowd, the society lot, the high-finance gang. He doesn't parade his knowledge; it just slips out in asides. He's a wrong 'un, I'm certain, though I've no proof for it, but it's simply impossible to—to *place* him! He beats me. He was desperately keen to know all about me, and as Home Office sounds beastly official, I told him I didn't do anything but waste my time and my money, so don't you let me down by saying I'm in the Home Office, old son. What a life! Believe me, I'm enjoying myself thoroughly. Well, the day hasn't been wasted, for we've unearthed the second man in the library that night. And now we want to know who was the third!"

"We'll learn one of these days," I said. "But talking of enjoying yourself thoroughly, I've a story to



tell you." And thereupon I related my experiences up in the glen.

As I finished George gripped my arm. "Ronny, old thing," he said in a low voice, "forgive me! If I'd known, I wouldn't have played the clown. And here you've been letting me jabber all down this lane and never said a word about it. By God!" he cried, his voice snapping, "I'll get to the bottom of all this yet. As sure as I'm alive the cur who's responsible will wish he'd never been born!" His fists were clenched, and there was a look in George's eye which implied that somebody would have a thin time one day soon.

"There's a couple of hours till grub time yet," said George, when we entered the cottage. "You'd better have a drink and a snooze—you're bound to be done up after that target practice you've been through."

He went into the sitting-room in front of me, and I heard him give an exclamation of surprise.

"What's up?" I demanded following quickly.

He pointed round the room. The place was in an unholy mess. Drawers were pulled out of the sideboard, and a pane was broken in the window.

"The leather case!" he cried. "Where did you put it? Somebody's been here!"

I ran into my bedroom, and drew back in amazement. This room also had been ransacked. I leapt to the dressing-table, and knelt down, fumbling in my pocket for my keys.

"It's locked in the bottom drawer," I said swiftly.

George gave it a tug, and it came out in his hands. "It's been forced, Ronny!"

I had wrapped the case carefully in an old blazer and put it in a corner of the drawer. I tumbled the contents pell-mell on the floor. Quickly I ran through them, my companion looking down eager-eyed. I got to my feet and dropped on a chair, gazing blankly into George's face.

I'm not given to histrionics, but when I spoke I think my voice must have been worthy of Irving in some good old melodrama.

"Not there?" said George quietly.

"The case," I said, "is gone!"

## CHAPTER XIII

### THE MOVEMENTS OF THE REVEREND DUNCAN SHAW

**T**HERE was silence in the room for perhaps a minute. Then George shoved his hands in his pockets and whistled. He produced no melody—only a tuneless jumble of notes rasped out to hide his feelings. For myself I sat still in my chair, arms hanging at my sides, as if I had been knocked out in the boxing ring and was trying to collect my senses. Neither of us uttered a word.

With a hand none too steady, George suddenly offered me a cigarette, and took one himself.

"We may as well face it, Ronny," he said, as I extended a match. "In love and war the fool is always he who under-estimates his enemy. That's what we've done. Under-estimated them by a hundred per cent."

I agreed ruefully. "Yes, and we've shown our hand—given it clean away, in fact. Now they know that we're on the track of the same thing as they're after. In fact they know we've gone the length of collaring that leather case out of the cabinet when it was in Seymore's house!"

"I wonder," mused George.

"They're bound to," I insisted. "Seymore seemed to think it was in the cabinet—didn't we hear him say so to Forsyth that night in the library? He gets the cabinet taken to his rooms so as to search it from top to bottom out and in, and when he goes through it, finds nothing. Then while he's keeping us away from the place with this picnic bluff of his, one of his jolly hired assassins goes

through our cottage and finds the very thing they want, carefully hidden in my bedroom. The game's up as far as we're concerned. They must know we're aware of what they are up to ! ”

“ Wait a bit,” said George slowly. “ That looks obvious. But it's not really obvious after all. You've forgotten two little points. Firstly, who has been here this afternoon—who has got the leather case ? Is it one of Seymore's people, or is it the beggar who's double-crossing Seymore ? ”

“ You mean the man who broke into Seymore's place after we had finished ! ” I exclaimed. “ Yes, I had forgotten him. That's a point, and a dashed important one.”

“ And the fact that he went through the cabinet, and the cabinet only, showed that he must have known it was there in Seymore's rooms. Somebody seems to be keeping a pretty close watch on our Mr. Seymore.”

I nodded.

“ And this man, whoever he is,” continued George, “ when he finds nothing there, concludes that we may have it. So he goes through our cottage with a small tooth-comb and finds what he wants. That's feasible enough, you'll admit. But nobody has any proof you didn't go through the cabinet yourself in the library and take out the case *before* the cabinet was collared by clever Mr. Seymore.”

“ True,” I granted. “ I certainly spent some hours after tea my first day there going over the Hall—that's when I noticed the mark on the panel. It was that night the cabinet must have been taken away to Seymore's and that other one shoved in its place.”

“ Yes,” said George confidently, “ and you must add another thing in our favour. While Mr. Seymore has been playing his little part like a genius, what about us ? Haven't we done rather well too ? Have we shown by so

much as the flicker of an eyelash that we suspect Seymore isn't all he says he is? Haven't we been the typical young bloods from London who regard life as one long breezy lark? Haven't I worshipped at Seymore's feet, and pretended to drink up his honeyed words as well as his cocktails? In fact, to carry out our part properly, we ought to mention to Seymore casually that some lunatic has been trying to put your light out with a gun. Pretend to take him into our confidence. Pretend to trust him absolutely."

"That's an idea," I agreed.

"But there's one thing against it."

"And what's that?"

"Because," said George carefully, "*Seymore may know nothing about it!* We may then be giving him some valuable information."

"George," I said, "you're a blinking Napoleon when it comes to tactics."

"Didn't I tell you I was going to be a great statesman?" he grinned. "Our course is clear. There's only one thing to be done."

"And what's that?"

"In the words of the hymn—at least I think it was a hymn, or I may be merely misquoting Mr. Asquith—we must watch and wait. To try and get back that leather case now is hopeless on the face of it. Whoever has it, will be making use of it pretty soon."

"But what sort of use could they make of it?"

George shook his head. "Only Heaven and the people who've got it know."

"But what if that case is valuable in itself? What if that case was all they were after? I mean, what if it contains something they can transfer into cash right away?"

"No; there's more in it than that. This leather case

must be only a means to an end. Otherwise, why all this desperate secrecy to pinch the case without giving a hint of it to anyone? No; there's another move on foot—you mark my words. And I have an idea it has something to do with Brackenbridge Hall."

"And they want me out of the way to make the coast clear for them?"

"That," said George slowly, "is the situation as I read it. What will be the next move? You've heard of the keystone of an arch? It seems to me their next move will be the key-move. If we're on it quick enough, we spoil their game. If we're not, well——"

"——They'll win," I cried, "and Brackenbridge may be without a laird!"

We were quiet that evening. After laying down our large but simple supper—which Jessie, apparently to show her knowledge of how the great live, insisted on calling dinner—she did not return till next morning, and it was our custom on finishing the meal to use George's bedroom as a sitting-room. This was the largest room in the cottage, and with the addition of the sofa and the two rather groggy-legged arm-chairs it was quite homely. George's camp-bed in the corner gave it a slight resemblance to one of our old army billets. George preferred to prop his bed up here rather than sleep in what was, apart from my own, the only other bedroom in the cottage, a small gloomy room with little light or air. Of course as a dutiful host, I had insisted firmly that he should occupy my room and let me camp out in the sitting-room; but like a dutiful guest George firmly insisted that I should not move, and claimed a guest's prerogative of doing exactly what he liked, provided he didn't blow the place up or burn it down. In George's room then we sat, a siphon and a whisky decanter between us on the table, and smoke curling up between



us to the low ceiling. The evening was chilly, so I put a match to the fire in the old-fashioned grate. We didn't light the lamp, and it was pleasant to sit and smoke in the firelight.

It had been a day extraordinary to look back on. My talk with Marget ; the attempt on my life in the glen ; our return to find the case gone—these gave ample food for thought. In the evening, at George's suggestion, we had entered the Hall, and in the library found that the cabinet had been replaced. Seymore must have returned to the farm early in the morning and gone through it to his satisfaction ; for there it stood, with the slight dent in the panel, as if it had never left its accustomed spot. It must have been replaced at dawn before anyone was astir, and he must have had one or more stout helpers.

I broke the silence. "How soon do you think they'll start operations ? I mean, provided your theory about the case is correct."

George grunted, and looked over his shoulder as if to assure himself the shutters of the room were closed. "Perhaps to-night—there's no saying. At any rate, if your suggestion is correct, about there being something of realizable value in that case, then somebody is hoofing it hard for the Continent to-night. So if we never see Seymore's sweet face again, we'll know there's been a little old fortune in that case, and he's got it."

"But you've already said that was unlikely." In which remark George acquiesced with a curt nod, and I continued : "Well, suppose they do start operations to-night, how are we to know about it ?"

George smoked thoughtfully for a minute or two. "As a matter of fact," he said at last, "I had been pondering that point. I said we'd got to watch and wait. Well, any mutt can wait. But it takes a deuced clever man to do the watching efficiently. Not a soul must suspect we've

got a wary eye open. We must go on exactly as before, but at the same time your old family mansion through the trees there has got to be in the beam of our searchlight. What I was going to suggest is this : To-night you go to bed as usual. I won't undress, and every couple of hours or perhaps oftener, I'm going to have a quiet stroll around. My little shooter will be in my pocket, so I'll be quite safe, and if I find there's anything doing I'll pop back at once and give you the nod. Then we can get busy ! ”

“ But why should you have all the—— ”

“ That's all right. To-morrow night you act the policeman and I'll get a bit of shut-eye. Besides, one can always have a snooze after lunch. How does time go ? Eleven o'clock, by jove ! I'm going to have my first saunter now.” He poured himself out another peg and splashed in soda.

“ Do you want the back-door key of the Hall ? ” I asked.

“ Not going in,” said George. “ I can see all I want from the outside. By the way, how did you leave the library curtains this evening ? ”

“ Open.”

“ Right. I won't be ten minutes. Cheer-ho.”

He was gone, pulling the door shut behind him, and when I was alone in the silence of the cottage I blamed myself for agreeing to George's proposal. It was an eerie job for one to be awake all night without companionship. Surely one of us could have lain on the camp-bed, while the other sat and read at the fireside, and we could have had turn about at keeping an eye on things. To have taken alternative watches, as in the trenches, would have been a much more cheery arrangement. I decided to broach the matter immediately on his return. Certain that I heard his footsteps, I got to my feet to open the front door, which had an ordinary Yale lock and opened with a handle only

on the inside. But after a couple of strides, I paused in the middle of the floor and listened. Sure enough I could hear footsteps coming up the path, but somehow they did not sound like George's.

Was it George having a joke with me? It would be quite like him to keep up our spirits with some such jest. The footsteps were lighter and quicker than his, and then they stopped.

There was no means of taking an observation, for the fire was bright in the grate, and to have opened the shutters would have disclosed the interior of the room. The only way was to slip out of my own bedroom window, and to creep down to the front of the cottage through the shrubbery. I was about to put this into operation when there was a knock on the door.

It was faint, but I could hear it distinctly enough: three soft separate taps, carefully modulated to give just sufficient warning to wakeful ears, but not enough to disturb a sleeper. To creep round and try to see who was there would mean delay, and delay looked suspicious. Suspicion was precisely the atmosphere we wished to avoid. Therefore I felt in my pocket for a reassuring ridge of smooth metal, and lighting a candle, I walked firmly to the door and threw it open.

A figure stepped quickly forward.

"Marget!" I cried.

The girl was hatless and was holding a cloak round her dress of some soft material. The blackness of the cloak made her face look dead white, and her eyes shining in the candlelight seemed large and troubled.

"Come in," I exclaimed. "You mustn't stand out there. It's cold to-night."

"Just for a moment, then," she whispered. "I am so glad you're still awake."

"Why, is anything the matter?" I led her into the

sitting-room and seated her in a big chair before the fire. "George is out just now, but won't be long. We're quite alone, if there's anything you want to tell me. Is something wrong?"

She looked up at me and nodded quickly.

"Then I'm glad you've come to me, dear," I said, taking into mine the cold hand that lay on the arm of her chair. "What is it?"

"It's Dad," she said. "He hasn't come home."

"Mr. Shaw? You mean something has happened to him?"

She nodded again. "I'm sure of it."

I saw that I must do my best to calm her. "Don't worry, Marget. It's only a little after eleven. What time did he go out?"

"Shortly after lunch," said Marget. "He should have been home by eight o'clock. I wonder what can have happened? I'm so worried."

"Where did he go after lunch?"

"I believe he was to visit some of the congregation. I don't know who they were, even if he went, but he hasn't come back. Dad never does that. He's always back in time for supper at eight o'clock. What do you think can have happened to him? I'm—I'm really afraid. . . ."

I pressed her hand, which was trembling, and slipped my arm around her shoulders. She sobbed softly, her hair against my face. Of a sudden she pushed me gently away, her cheeks still glistening faintly with a tear. "You don't think it hateful of me coming like this and bothering you?"

I gave a cry of compassion and pity and seized again the hand she had drawn away. "I think it's beautiful of you coming to me when you're in trouble. You've no idea, Marget, how much it means to me."

"There is no one else to go to," she said helplessly.

"There's only old Kirsty and myself in the house. Kirsty's in an awful state—I had terrible trouble in getting her to stay in the house alone, while I ran along to see if you were still up. Oh, Ronny, we are pals, aren't we? And you don't mind a pal coming to you at this daft hour when—when that pal's worried to death?"

I leant close to her full of yearning. Never had her delicate beauty seemed more fascinating, with those great tragic questioning eyes and her soft lips quivering.

"Marget," I said quietly, "don't worry any more about your father, dear. You'll only make yourself more miserable. See if I'm not right! He's met someone and is staying on talking—perhaps some farmer who's driving him home this very minute, or possibly he's visited someone who is dreadfully ill, and has had to stay and help."

"I wish I could think that was really so."

"A message will come soon, you'll find. Your father won't let you down. He'll send you word or return himself——"

"What's that?" interrupted Marget quickly.

Faint and muffled through the shutters had come a cheerful rat-tat on the window-pane.

"That's only George," I said. "I'll let him in."

"Nothing doing," said George quietly. "I thought I heard footsteps, but it must have been a myth."

"It wasn't," I said. "They belonged to Miss Shaw from the Manse. She's here now."

"Well I never," chuckled George, entering. "That's top-hole. Charmed, Miss Marget, I'm sure. But I say, I hope there's nothing wrong?"

"Her father hasn't been seen since midday," I explained. "She's rather worried. But I told her he's bound to turn up soon, or send some sort of message."

George was quiet for a moment, then said:

"Don't worry, Miss Shaw. He'll be all right. Why,

he might have sprained his ankle and had to lie up somewhere. I'll tell you what. Let's all wander along to the Manse now and see if there's any news. Probably a rustic lad with chaff in his whiskers and a grubby note in his hand will be waiting on the doorstep. Three to one on a sprained ankle ! ”

“ Two to one on the parson himself, full of explanations,” I said, and we set out in the darkness.

It was a considerable time before Kirsty would be induced to answer our ministrations to the bell. The front door she had locked, and it was only after Marget, through the letter-box, assured her we were friends and all was well that the door swung back.

“ I've had one fright already the nicht, miss,” explained the old servant. “ The bell rang and I thought it was you, but when I unlocked the door it was a strange man. He left this note, miss, and I could hear him drive awa' in a car.”

“ I told you so,” said George cheerfully. “ Four to one on a sprained ankle. . . . Five to one ! ”

Marget read the note with anxious eyes. “ He's gone to Liverpool,” she said quickly. “ It's from Dad. He came home at eight o'clock, he says, and when he was just at the gate a messenger met him from his old school-chum, Mr. James Bardwell of Liverpool. ‘ You've often heard me speak of Jim Bardwell,’ Dad writes. ‘ A friend of his had come from Liverpool and motored all the way from St. Eildon to fetch me. Poor Bardwell is very ill ; they fear he won't last long. He has been asking repeatedly for me, and Mrs. Bardwell in despair sent for me. I couldn't let poor old Jim pass away without being near him, one of the best men who ever lived.’ Oh, I'm glad to get this ! Dad says he'll write when he gets there. In any case he hopes not to be more than a few days. Apparently he wrote this at St. Eildon and was to hand



it to someone who was to pass through Brackenbridge to-night."

"Then that's all right," I said reassuringly. "Your mind's at rest. I was sure you'd get word."

"Have you the Bardwells' address?" asked George. "You should drop Mr. Shaw a line telling him not to worry about you."

"I haven't the address," said Marget in slight perplexity. "As a matter of fact I don't seem to remember the name Bardwell, but of course I haven't met all Dad's school-chums."

"Never mind," said George, "you're sure to hear in a day or so. Now if I were you, I'd go and quieten that dear old maid of yours and bundle her off to bed. Same little dose to yourself."

"Thank you both ever so much," said Marget sincerely. "You must think me a dreadful fidget over nothing at all. Now won't you have something to eat or drink before you go?"

We munched an apple from the sideboard, and departed.

"Bardwell!" exploded George suddenly on the road. "Great snakes! Bardwell!" He hurled the core of his apple into the hedge. "Ronny, have you ever heard a wilder cock-and-bull yarn in your life? Bardwell! And the girl admits she hasn't even heard the name before. Great Scott, he might have selected someone she'd *heard* of!"

"You think he hasn't gone to Bardwell's?"

"No. Because there's no such person. Oh, he's gone to Liverpool all right. Rather. But he's hopping on a boat to-night or early to-morrow, and going where we'll never see him again.

"You mean——"

"I mean that you were right, Ronny. That case was full of something transferable into ready cash, and the

parson's got it, my lad, and is hooking into the blue. It's the finish, I'm afraid. The game's up. Shaw's won. We've lost." George yawned loudly as we entered the cottage. "Well, there's one thing, Ronny, I'll get a decent night's rest after all!"

## CHAPTER XIV

### I TAKE MATTERS INTO MY OWN HANDS

NEXT morning was chilly with a wet mist, but I rose full of beans with my brain clear. I confess that I had gone to bed dog-tired, convinced that we were beaten, that it was all over, and I had fallen asleep with a feeling that was almost one of pleasant relief. They had won—or, rather, Shaw had won: well, good luck to them all! At any rate, George and I would get some peace. But now in the morning I was in a different frame of mind. It seemed to me that there were one or two points that required some thought.

“Hullo,” said George at breakfast, “here’s a chit from my Home Office pal in Edinburgh. Says if I’ve nothing better to do, I might run in and have lunch with him. Like to come? He doesn’t say to fish you along to lunch, as I half fancy he wants to see me rather particularly and talk official stuff. But why not come in to Edinburgh and do yourself proud at the N. B. Hotel?”

“I’m not keen myself, but I’ll tell you what—I’ll ask Marget to lunch with me in Edinburgh, if you’ll give us a lift.”

“Splendid,” said George. “Take out the lassie and cheer her up. She’ll need it all. Ronny, after you went off to bed last night, I had two or three more pipes over the little surprise Shaw has sprung on us. One or two items rather stick in my throat.”

“Some have been sticking in mine too,” I put in.

George nodded. “It’s not so simple as I thought it looked last night. For instance—if he wanted to clear

out, why the deuce did he run the risk of Marget and Kirsty getting the wind up over his absence? Heavens, they might have got in touch with the police, or anything! You'd have thought common sense would have made him leave a note for them at the Manse before he went. That would have kept them quiet. Either the story is true, or it's not true and Shaw has bolted with the leather case, or"—George paused—"or, lastly, Shaw has bolted right enough, but not of his own free will!"

"That is——"

"That is," said George, "he has done a bunk in terror. Possibly he didn't go to St. Eildon at all. Then he realized there would be a rumpus at home, and got this letter through to Marget to quieten her. I'm not laying too much stress on the idea, mind you," added George, "but it seemed to emerge in my old bean and I weighed up well the pros and cons. Something may turn up yet that will give us a further hint. A letter of some kind should surely reach Marget by about to-morrow."

"Judging from the state of the old lad's nerves, I should say it sounds feasible that he got the wind up. He probably had the quakes so badly that he couldn't stand it a minute longer and scooted. In which event, he probably hasn't got the case."

"That possibility," said George, "is exactly what spoilt this little lad's night's sleep after all."

"Why, what do you mean—did you go out after all?"

"I had my little walk every hour or so. I decided to run no risks. To conclude that Shaw has got away with the boodle struck me as rather jumping to conclusions, or so it seemed to me when I thought about it carefully. So I decided to carry out our arrangement after all. As Shakespeare says, not a mouse was stirring on the beastly battlements."

"You're a Trojan," I declared. "You come to Scotland for a holiday and here I run you in for all this! You've been putting your head in a noose every day of the week, and what are you getting out of it?"

"The best fun I've had for years," chuckled George. "Now you buzz along and ask Marget to lunch. Be sure and ask her nicely."

I was back in the cottage in a very short time, despondent. "She's got a bad headache Kirsty tells me," I informed him. "Kirsty's keeping her in bed till it moves off. So you push on to Edinburgh alone, old thing. I've heaps to do about here."

When George had gone, promising to be back before tea-time, I drew up a chair to the fire and sat there thinking. The day was chilly; a damp spongy mist that hung round made one almost forget it was summer. But the fog outside was nothing to the fog in my own brain; and each new turn that events took seemed to lead further away from a solution. It was like playing a game of chess, with the moves of your opponent concealed from you. Fumbling, we were, in a fog much more dense than the fog that advanced and retired in pallid platoons of vapour outside the window.

I reached for a poker to stir the fire, and there was none, so I stretched to a corner of the mantelpiece where the old laird's walking-stick had hung ever since I had shoved it there one careless moment. I was served well for my laziness in not strolling to the kitchen and getting the decent hefty iron implement that had lain beside me on the sofa a few nights ago, for the walking-stick got beautifully jammed between the bars. I lay back and tugged. I was quite unprepared for the result of my simple action. To my utter amazement the handle came away from the shaft of the stick—but with it came a long tapering blade of shining steel that pencilled to a vicious point! I gazed at

the thing in my hand as if it were alive and had turned round and bitten me.

The laird's walking-stick was a camouflaged rapier!—and a mighty dangerous one to run against in a scuffle. Why on earth had the old laird required this? A clear enough proof, it was, to my mind, that his last days had not been without some keen consciousness of danger.

I hauled out the stick from the bars of the fire and examined it, then slid the blade home into its scabbard. I must have accidentally pulled back part of the silver ferrule which had acted as a lock, and had released the blade. I now clipped it back into position. No one would dream in examining it that the walking-stick was not all it seemed. Well, in a game like the one I was playing, I reflected with a grin, one couldn't have too many pals such as this one within reach; and I decided it would go with me on my perambulations in the grounds of the Hall that very night.

I jumped up and paced the floor restlessly. How could we ginger things up? Was there no way of bringing matters to a head? To watch the Hall—especially at night—was only common sense. But what if it played no further part in the future scheme of events? We would be at a standstill. Surely, I argued, we should also keep an open eye on Seymore. His actions might yield a hint of immense value. But he was a clever dog; it would have to be done with the guile of the devil; for to make a blunder would be showing our strongest card, namely, that we seemed to think him a decent fellow, and an amusing neighbour, and nothing more. I slipped impatiently into a waterproof, jammed a cap on my head, and pushed out into the fog.

The fog was thinner now. The wind was veering south and driving it back to the sea. Of a sudden it would lift in front of you, like a blanket being twitched upwards, and



you could see for fifty or eighty yards ahead ; the next moment it had blown down, so that even the outlines of the hedge across the lane wavered and melted into chalk-white space. I climbed into the field, and made for the Home Farm, where a clump of bushes that clung around the hedge opposite the farm-house formed a natural shelter, and I got among them prepared to pass a boring couple of hours of incessant watching.

Lying there with my eyes fixed on the garden gate, a new thought occurred to me. What if Seymore had also bolted ? If so, had he bolted *with* Shaw or *after* him ? The notion intrigued me. It seemed stupid to be there waiting for him to emerge if the man were gone. But it was a simple matter to find out. I retraced my steps a hundred yards up the hedge-side, broke through into the lane, and made my way to the back door of the farm-house.

" Ah, Jessie," I said, " is Forsyth in just now ? He's not ? I just wanted to refer to the estate books for a moment."

" Come in, sir, come in," pressed Jessie. " The office door's open, sir. Just go right through."

" Mr. Seymore at home just now ? " I asked casually, as I was about to close the office door behind me.

" Aye, sir—would ye like to see him ? "

" Not at all," I declared. " I don't want you to disturb him. I dare say we've both lots to do this morning."

" He'll be going out any minute, sir," said Jessie. " I've made sandwiches for him—he's going up the hills to sketch, sir. He thinks the mist'll lift."

I nodded and closed the door. If he were going up among the hills to sketch on a day like this, then he must be mighty keen. I sat down at the desk and twiddled with a pencil. Footsteps went along the passage, there was a murmur of voices, and the back door slammed.

Seymore had set out, but whether or not to sketch I couldn't guess.

"I'm hanged if I believe he's going near the hills," I deliberated. "If he knows anything about that case being collared yesterday, and Shaw disappearing last night, then surely he'll be getting busy now himself." I got to my feet full of purpose. "We'll jolly well see where the blighter is going!"

In two steps I was at the door. I called out to Jessie that I had got all I wanted from the books and was going back home, and the next moment I was in the farm-yard. I walked sedately past the kitchen window and into the lane, so that Jessie's mind would be at rest concerning my destination, then crossed into the field and doubled back on my tracks. At the corner of the farm buildings I paused and took an observation.

A stony cart-track led in a slow gradient to the foot of the steeper hill-slopes. There was no sign of Seymore; but then the mist restricted one's vision to a narrow radius. I listened intently. There was the distant clink of feet upon the stones. On soft grass I skirted the side of the dyke that bordered the cart-track, and kept those footsteps within earshot. Once the mist swept upwards in thin whorls, and I dropped behind the dyke like a winged rook, but not before I had seen my man plodding along, pipe in mouth, his sketching-gear slung on his back, as innocent-looking a figure as you could meet on these hill-sides. I kept on the north side of the cart-track, for I expected any moment to hear or see him clambering over the dyke and doubling back southwards to the main road. But in this anticipation I was wrong. He doggedly held to the rough road that wound upwards to the hills.

As we rose to higher ground, the wind was fresher, and the mist was fluffed out into low careering clouds. In prudence I fell further to the rear as the visibility improved.

It was well that I did so ; for the cart-track stopped abruptly ; and when I reached the dead-end, I found that it terminated in a hill-road, coarse under foot but wider and better than the cart-track. It meandered down into the valley on the one side, on the left sweeping upwards behind a shoulder of the hillside into the heart of the Lammermuirs.

Seymore had turned to the left. Was this a fool's errand, I asked myself—had he really come to paint some mist-effect ? Or had he some deeper motive in these frequent pilgrimages to the hills ? I held doggedly on my way. The road was steeper now, and wound hither and thither round hummocks of heather and gorse. Soon I was hot and perspiring with exertion. There was also the strain of keeping my man at a safe distance, for there was the danger that he might drop at the roadside for a breather and I blunder into him. But he must have been in excellent condition, because he held steadily on without a pause. And then I heard the clang of a gate, and with steaming breath I panted out a voiceless hope that this was the journey's end.

At the gate I drew up to take stock of the position. It was impossible to gauge how high I had come, but this point seemed to be the top of the rise, for the road swung sharply away to the left, dipping downwards as sharply. Beyond the gate, a rough cart-track led through the heather, disappearing into a dense belt of fir-trees. A couple of Shetland ponies tossed their manes and eyed me inquisitively.

I looked over the gate. To the right, the ground rose in a gentle curve, and dropped towards the valley where Brackenbridge lay ; but to the left I could see nothing save a rickety wire fence and, beyond it, mist. Seymore had disappeared into the firs ahead, and I clambered over the gate and made for the fence. A few yards beyond the

fence, the ground dropped sheer away into space. I tossed over a pebble. There was no sound ; not the faintest clink came back to me out of that white well of fog. Then with a rush of recollection I knew where I was. Forsyth, with a thick forefinger on the brown shadings of the map, had described it to me ; this was my own property where I stood ; it was Black Edge Hill.

I made across the heather and ran for the shelter of the fir-wood.

## CHAPTER XV

### A STRANGE RECEPTION

**I**T was with a comfortable feeling of safety that I drew up in the fir-wood. The trees grew thick, and it was with difficulty that I pushed through and came out on the other side of the belt. The ground rolled forward before me, sloping gently upwards to my right, while the edge of rock on my left, and the deep layer of mist beyond, indicated the ravine that formed the north side of Black Edge Hill. The mist lifted for a minute, and in front of me I caught a glimpse of another clump of firs, and among them the grey roofs of buildings. I thought at once of Forsyth, and how he had rented the old Black Edge farmhouse to a stranger as summer quarters, and I looked at them with interest. But my inspection revealed little ; for the mist blew down again and blotted out everything, save the foreground of the field in front of me, and the rocky brim of the precipice that gaped close on my left.

I had kept clear of the road among the firs, in case I should run into someone : and in my next move I gave it a still wider berth. Making up my mind to proceed, I suddenly emerged from cover, sprinted for the clump of trees round the farm buildings, and dropped in the undergrowth, panting. The whole thing at this point struck me as ludicrous ; and I smiled at the notion of my spying like this round my own property—I who, with a word, could clear everybody from the place and live there myself if I chose. But it was not the place I had come to see ; it was the people. What did Seymore want at this lonely spot ? He had come straight here without a pause ; he certainly

hadn't dropped in impulsively in passing ; what then was his errand ? Perhaps he was but making a friendly call, and I was making a blunder, but it would do no harm to have a quiet look round. I got to my feet and, crouching, moved forward through the trees towards the farm-house. A closed gate led into the farm-yard. The buildings were bigger than I had imagined ; a lofty barn, built of stone, with an earth roof to which weeds and mosses clung, filled one side of the grass-grown square. Some sheds stood beside this, mostly tumble-down, while directly opposite the barn was the back of the farm-house itself. A smaller shed, which looked like a little garage, apparently newly erected, blocked my view of the house, and I moved through the trees to get a better look. Between where I stood and the garden wall was twenty yards of open ground, but across the wreckage of the garden I spied an admirable place of vantage. A tall thick boxwood hedge, untrimmed and shaggy, would hide me from the house, as the new shed hid me from the yard. I slipped back to my old position, and, greatly daring, I made a bolt for it. I moved round the corner, over the ruins of the garden wall, and, with an eye on an upper window that looked dead and thick with cobwebs, I scurried round the berry bushes and crouched behind the hedge. I was now within a yard or two of the house—I believe I could have reached across the path with my stick—and yet I was completely shut off from view.

Both windows in the side of the house facing me were open. Through one of them came a mutter of voices. The sound rose and fell, and I stood on tiptoe to hear the better. Seymore's voice I could distinguish, but not his words. The other talked with the fluid buoyancy and intonation of a foreigner. I wondered whether I dared risk going round the hedge to stand close against the wall beside the window. The window was high, and the path



deep, and I could not be seen from the house unless someone put their head out of a window. But my intentions were dispersed by the sudden sound of footsteps coming round the front of the house. It completely caught me off my guard.

I realized that I was in a ticklish situation. The spot where I stood could be seen from one portion of the path which bent out round some shrubs, yet if I crouched hard against the hedge there was a chance of my escaping detection. But I decided not to risk it. There was no time to waste. With a few quick bounds I was back over the wall in the shelter of the shed.

The footsteps crunched down the path beyond the hedge that had hidden me a few moments before. And a new sound came to my ears—the deep low growl of a dog. The man spoke to it soothingly, and then with an angrier note in his voice. I knew only too well what was troubling the dog—it had scented the presence of a stranger. There was the click of a gate, and they went through into the yard. “Come on, you brute!” the man growled, and he finished up with some foreign oath. The dog seemed to be tugging one way, and the man the other.

I had an impulse first of all to bolt back to the shelter of the trees, but a glance told me that I couldn’t cover the ground in time. My second thought was to leap into the tangled garden and lie low among the thick bushes. That was more feasible, but the dog seemed insistent. The man cursed at it bitterly, and the dog gave a couple of sharp barks. They were now coming towards the gate a few yards from where I stood. “This,” I said to myself, “is what you get for your inquisitiveness!”

I was as good as discovered: that was evident. He was simply bound to see me. There was only one thing to be done: announce my presence before he saw me. I took a couple of quick steps over to the cart-track and walked

slowly up to the gate as if I had just arrived. I looked around me with a great show of interest. Then I pretended to be suddenly aware of the man's presence, and I leant over the gate, looked him straight in the face, and inquired, "Does anyone live here?"

The man was short and thick, with a broad dark-skinned face, and stupid black peering eyes. He was obviously a servant of sorts—a foreigner whose nationality I could not place—and while he looked a tough customer, it was clear he was not dowered with much intelligence. He made no attempt to subdue the dog, a great ugly grey brute with a rolling eye, and it dragged forward and shoved its snout, with the lip curled back from its teeth, through the bars of the gate. I was thankful that closed gate stood between us. I am a dog-lover, but there are times when love should be tempered with discretion.

"Yes," said the man slowly, his foreign origin cropping out as clearly in his talk as in his appearance. "It is occupied. You are trespassing." He looked at me insolently. "You must go away—get out."

"I may be trespassing," I said, in a conciliatory tone. "If so, I'm sorry. I'm doing no harm."

"No matter," enunciated the man stolidly. "Get out. If you are a stranger, get out."

"I am a stranger," I said, conscious of my rising anger, "but I'm hanged if I'll get out for you! And you will kindly speak to me civilly."

The man grinned in my face. "Ho, then you will get out for him!" He pointed to the dog that was tugging at the leash. "You will get out—quick!"

This was not at all the way I wanted things to go. My sole desire was to make a speedy exit without attracting the attention of the people in the house. To allow threats and abuse to be flung backwards and forwards over the gate was blank folly. I decided that the shortest way

was the best, and, swallowing my pride, I turned in my steps and made back down the cart-track. There was soft insolent laughter from behind the gate. I stopped, anger rising again within me. For two pins I'd have gone back and given him a piece of my mind, if not a taste of my fist. Then there was the rasp of the opening gate; the next moment he had cried something to the dog; and it was loping after me with a fierce growl of menace. There was only one thing left to do; and I did it. I cut and ran for the fir-wood.

I had a good start, but the brute was fast, and I rushed into those trees with it almost on my heels. Thanks to the undergrowth I kept clear of it; and I emerged again into the open in a passionate rage at that man, and at that dog, which leapt out on the heather not twenty yards away. When was he going to whistle the brute off? In its present excited state, it was more than a match for a man with only a stick and stout shoes to defend himself. A stick—my mind went quickly back—it was the old laird's stick I carried. With a gulp of relief I recollected that in my hand was a worthy weapon, which I'd have no hesitation in using if need be. Confidently, I made a rush over the ground between me and the dry-stone dike of the hill-road.

The dog came circling nearer, growling ferociously. I realized with terror that it was keeping on the far side of me and I was slanting nearer and nearer to the rim of the gorge. The next I knew was the huge animal bounding forward to leap at me. I hit at it hard as it came. The blow glanced across its flat head, but failed to stop it. I heard the snap of teeth, felt its huge shoulder hurtling against my side. My blow had done no damage, but it had caused the brute to miss me; and its teeth instead of getting me fairly in the arm, grazed the skin and tore my sleeve. As I swung round the dog bounced away; then,

my foot going in a hole, I toppled backwards on a tuft of heather, my stick flying from my hand.

The dog was now at a pitch of madness. It crouched and came at me preparing to spring, hesitated and came on again, its teeth like two white saw-edges, its eyes wild. It was either to be the dog or myself: one of us had to go under, unless a miracle intervened. My hand reached out for the stick; I clipped back the ferrule; and as the beast bounded on to me, I drew the blade from its wooden scabbard. Half on the ground, half on my feet, I lunged as it leapt. The point of the rapier caught it behind the shoulder, and I felt it sink home. I shut my eyes in sudden horror as I stood up. The beast had rolled over, and it gave a long low cry. I drew out the blade and looked down at the animal. The sleek flanks quivered for a moment, then were still. There was blood mixed with the foam round its mouth. Then I realized the truth. The dog was dead.

I looked round me with strange feelings. Whether or not the man was following, I did not know. The firs I had left were dim in the driving mist. No one had seen our fight, or the tragic ending. Ten yards away my eye picked out the wire fence that guarded the cliff-top; and I stooped and picked up the dog. It was as heavy as a calf; and with my nerves considerably unstrung, I staggered to the fence and toppled the limp lithe body over the edge. It dropped, soft and yielding, into space. With a shudder I ran for the hill-road and for home.

Lunch had been awaiting me for some time, because I made a detour to arrive from a different direction. I sat down to my food, thinking of the dog. I had never hated any dog as I hated that one, but all the same I found my eyes were wet.

“The sooner we make some inquiries about your

worthy tenant at Black Edge, the better," said George at tea. "What did you say his name is?"

"Forsyth didn't mention it," I replied. "At least, I can't remember it if he did. I feel like going back there and giving that yellow-faced blighter the thrashing of his life. I wish to heaven I had stuck him in the ribs and chucked him over into the gorge instead of the dog. When I meet my tenant I'll have a few remarks to offer him on the subject of receiving guests. How was that beggar to know I wasn't coming to call on his master?"

"He wouldn't know who you were, of course? You didn't give yourself away?"

"Rather not! That's why I turned tail instead of having it out with him. I never in my life felt more like catching a cove by the neck and knocking his head against a wall."

"Good job you didn't," smiled George. "Seymore and the other fellow would have streamed out in a beautiful panic. If there is really anything fishy about his visit there, he'd have been mighty suspicious that you had followed him. As it was, the fellow with the dog took you for a rather nosey stranger pottering about, and so sheered you off. But why all that fuss about sheering people off?"

I shook my head. "Lord knows. Mind you, I'm not even certain whether the chap who rents the place is there himself just now. I asked that of Forsyth yesterday when he was telling me about Black Edge, and he didn't seem to know. All this dashed insolence and big dog stuff may be just excess of zeal in the master's absence. The chap may have said, 'Now, Franz,' or whatever his name is, 'don't you let people mess about when I'm away. Go for 'em, Franz.' So Franz sets the hound on me."

"But Seymore seems to be allowed to mess about all

right. Must be pretty thick, those two, if Seymore coolly strolls in while the chap's away and bones his whisky."

"Yes, but he was having a good old quack in that room with somebody. If the tenant himself wasn't there, who were they?"

George lit a cigarette and pushed back his chair.

"Looks as if it was a case of '*When the cat's away.*' Something is going on up there that they want to keep dark. Probably that yellow-faced blighter was a sort of caretaker, and they've squared him not to blab to his boss. And also told him to buzz off any strangers who come near. Hullo, there's someone at the door."

I answered the knock. It was a boy with an orange-coloured envelope in his hand.

"Wire for you," I cried to George, tossing it over.

"Damn!" muttered George under his breath. He sat toying with it, the envelope still unopened.

"Rip it up," I suggested impatiently. "The boy's waiting to see if there's a reply."

"No reply," said George wearily. "I know what this is without opening it."

"Not bad news?"

"The worst. Ronny, I knew to-day at lunch-time that it was fifty-fifty whether I had to go back to London to-night. Wanted at the office. If it was definite that I must return, they were to wire me this afternoon. My pal in Edinburgh was on the 'phone with the Chief just after lunch. Cheer up, old thing. I'm afraid it's got to be."

"They're heartless swine!" I exclaimed. "Why, man, if you go, it knocks everything on the head. At least, I'll feel like chucking it by myself."

George inserted his finger and tore open the telegram, spreading the thin sheet on the table before him. "Heartless swine they are," said George scowling at it. "So tenderly they word these things. So full of pleading and



pity, don't you know. ' *To George Collier at Brackenbridge Hall, Berwickshire. Report ten to-morrow.*' That's all. Beautiful in its sweet brevity, ain't it? Oh, why didn't I enter a bank in early youth, and then I wouldn't have had two days lopped out of the middle of my leave."

"Two days?" I exclaimed, with relief. "That's not so bad, though it's bad enough. I was afraid, by the way you spoke, you were being yanked back for good. As it is, I'll be beastly lonely. I've a dashed good mind to come to Town with you."

"Don't do it," said George. "Not if you want to get to the bottom of this business. Of course from my selfish point of view, I'd rather you came; we'd have a couple of jolly evenings, and all that. But when we arrive back in two or three days"—he flung out his arms—"they've done all they want, and we may never learn another shred of the real truth."

"I'll stay," I said decisively. "You're right."

"If there's going to be any more target practice at you, Ronny, I'll never forgive myself."

"Don't worry about me," I replied with a laugh. "I'm not going to storm any other forts among the hills."

"You'll promise me," said George, raising a dictatorial finger, "that while I'm away you'll confine your activities to keeping a wary eye on the Hall and grounds." I nodded assent to his counsel, and he proceeded: "I'd have suggested we get the village bobby to put in a bit of nightwork round here, but that only looks as if we were on our guard."

"I'll keep my shooter handy," I assented. "And if there's a mix-up, I'll see to it that I don't fire last."

"You've a bit of leeway to make up in the reprisals

line, you know," grinned George. "And now come and help me to sit on a suit-case, there's a good fellow."

I saw George off at St. Eildon somewhere round eleven that night, and in a little over an hour from the time of setting out I was back in the car at Brackenbridge. I piled up the sitting-room fire, threw a rug over my knees, and lay down on the sofa, prepared for a night of watchfulness and for an hourly trek round the Hall.

It was an eerie job, with the thought always at the back of my mind that I was alone ; but it made me doubly alert. My night's work was in vain. There was not the faintest sign of activity. I made my last tour just after dawn, and then undressed and settled down in bed for an hour or two of decent sleep before Jessie should knock me with the word that breakfast was ready. Over my bacon and eggs I yawned prodigiously, and toppled straight back into bed. I was awakened by loud knocking, and, leaping up, glanced at my watch. The time was eleven o'clock, and the sun was bright on the wall. I slipped on my dressing-gown and went to the door.

A stranger was on the step. He raised his wide-brimmed soft hat and smiled. He had large bright brown eyes set wide apart, a close-trimmed pointed beard, and grey wavy hair. There was candour and humour in his smile, and a pleasing charm in his manner.

"Good morning," I said.

"Good morning. My name is Smith," he replied in a soft voice that was broguey like an Irishman's, though I did not think he was Irish. "Does Mr. Drysdale live here ? "

"Won't you come in ? My name's Drysdale."

"Ah ! Thank you."

In the sitting-room, he laid his hat on the table and looked at me with another smile.

“I am the tenant of Black Edge farm-house. I would particularly like a few words with you, Mr. Drysdale !”

## CHAPTER XVI

### I GET A QUICK CALL

"BLACK EDGE!" I repeated the name in astonishment, and my expression must have shown my surprise, for he gave an amused laugh and said:

"Why, didn't you know you had a tenant there?"

"Of course—of course I knew," I said shortly. "But I'm afraid I didn't know your name," I added with candour.

"You've every excuse," replied Mr. Smith politely.

"You've just taken over, haven't you? The old laird died quite recently—and I didn't hear about it till after the poor old chap's funeral. You see, we're not in the way of getting news up there in the hills. Have you been here long—that is, more than a day or two?"

"Oh, about a week or thereabout. But please sit down. Cigarette?"

"Thank you." He dropped into the arm-chair. "I only heard quite casually yesterday that a new laird had turned up, and I decided to come down and make his acquaintance. I hope I haven't pushed along too soon? I mean, before you're settled in the Hall and so forth?"

"Not at all; I'm delighted. I was coming round one of these days to look at Black Edge and other little bits of property in any case."

"Well, now, that's just the point," said Mr. Smith, flicking the ash from his cigarette. "I've come to offer you a very humble apology." His large brown eyes looked at me in mingled amusement and concern. I could not but wonder what on earth was coming, but I met his gaze unmoved as he continued: "At least, I concluded after-

wards it must be you to whom I owe it. A man came to Black Edge yesterday and his reception was, to put it mildly, preposterously rude. I was very upset about it when I heard. Was it you, by any chance? "

"As a matter of fact," I replied, "it was. I went for a long walk up in the hills before lunch, and when I saw some farm buildings, I wondered whether it was Black Edge. I didn't have a map, so for curiosity I thought I'd go in and inquire."

"My dear fellow," said Mr. Smith jumping to his feet, "I don't know how to tell how vexed I am. I was positive it was you. Please let me explain. You mustn't think too harshly of us. It's all that dashed fool of a servant's fault. He's got less brains than the average horse, but is really as loyal to me as it's possible to be. My health's bad, and I've got to travel a lot, and I picked Josef up in a little Bavarian town just after the war. He was down and out, and has stuck to me like a leech ever since as a valet. The rest's quite simple—I'm an unsociable sort of cuss, and I hate tramps and picnickers poking round, and told the fellow so. I've had twice before to reprimand Josef for being downright rude to people, but I can promise you I took a stick to his back when I heard what had happened. The fellow has crawled about, afraid to look at me, since yesterday—he's scared I will fling him out into the cold hard world. I can only repeat how confoundedly sorry I am. The next time you come to Black Edge, I promise that your reception will be more—shall we say—suited to a laird! "

"It's quite all right," I answered. "Don't let the thing worry you any more. I fumed at the time, of course, and thought of dropping you a note. But as I was coming shortly with my factor, I decided to mention the matter to you personally. Your servant is certainly a dangerous sort of beggar to let loose on people."

"More than that," exclaimed Mr. Smith. "The fool Josef has lost my dog. You saw it, didn't you? A beauty. A valuable dog, too, but I don't mind that so much. The man says the brute got loose and made after you, and it never came back. I thought perhaps you might be able to throw some light on it?"

My heart was beating a fine tattoo, but with an effort of will I kept my composure. "The dog came after me right enough," I answered, "but it disappeared in the mist."

Mr. Smith ran his fingers through his grey hair. "I thought so," he said despondently. "It's gone over into that gorge. The mist was dreadful yesterday. Mr. Drysdale, you mustn't think me a bloodthirsty brute when I say I'd as soon that man of mine had gone over as Cæsar. There are lots of other Josefs in the world, but only one Cæsar!" His eyes were troubled, and I could see the man was upset. If he only knew the truth, I reflected, how different his attitude towards myself would be! "I must get Josef to keep an eye on the stream. It's deep and black at the bottom of that gorge; nothing has an earthly chance that goes over there. Down at the water's edge the rocks are steep and slippery. Poor old Cæsar!"

"It's rotten hard luck," I murmured, feeling a cad in my inmost soul.

"I'll flay that fellow alive," said Smith between his teeth. "But there! We won't talk about that any more. Now to show you forgive us for that appalling reception yesterday, Mr. Drysdale, I wonder if you'd care to lunch with me one day?"

I said I would be charmed, and his face lit up.

"Make it soon—to-morrow?" he exclaimed. "Better still, come to dinner about seven, and we'll have a decent evening. You can come by road—you motor, I suppose?"



"I'll come in the two-seater," I nodded. "It belongs to a pal of mine."

"But pray bring him with you," pressed Mr. Smith.

"He's away at present, thanks, or I dare say he'd have been glad. Is the road all right?"

"Passable. You go along the main road and take the first on the left. It goes right up into the hills. There's a gate on your right just before it dips into the valley—you recall a gate?"

"I'll find the way," I assured him.

"To-morrow night at seven," repeated Mr. Smith rising. "I'm delighted you can come. I'm a solitary sort of devil, Mr. Drysdale, but it's pleasant to have a real long chat about things now and then."

"Do you know a man called Seymore?" I asked boldly, and awaited his answer with eagerness.

"Seymore? Yes. He lives round about here somewhere. I know him slightly. He knocks about doing water-colours."

"That's the man," I said. "Do you know him well?"

"No, very slightly. He has dropped in to have a drink at Black Edge, a few times, when he happened to be near. As a matter of fact, he came in yesterday. It was he who told me a new laird had turned up. He said you were a young fellow and described you in a vague sort of way. Indeed, it was he that put me on to the idea it was you, for Josef's description of you, which I dragged out of him, rather resembled Seymore's. So I thought I'd drop in on the chance that my guess was correct."

"I'm glad it was," I said heartily; and I strolled out with him, in spite of my dressing-gown, to the side-gates, where Smith got into a neat two-seater and was gone with a wave of the hand and a cry of, "Seven o'clock to-morrow!"

I went back to dress in a pleasant frame of mind. My

morning's caller interested me immensely. He must have been a man of fifty or more. I felt that with a little encouragement he could be extremely amusing—a philosopher and a wit. He certainly had charm, though it was possibly that charm which (in men at least) comes from an extreme degree of candour ; for he was not afraid to show his emotions, as was obvious when he spoke in sorrow about his dog.

And then the old Adam within me arose with a warning forefinger : I must not let my feelings run away with me like—well, like Smith ! It was almost my settled policy by this time to suspect every soul I met, or, at least, to regard them as potential enemies until they had proved themselves friends. Besides, an unwary word dropped even in the ear of a friend might lead to my undoing. I must listen and watch, and, for the rest, I must mind my own steps—for indeed it was a tight-rope of danger I was walking, as events had already proved. Still, I liked Smith, and in him I saw a useful ally. I saw too the possibility of gleaning from him information about Seymore which might possibly be useful, and I decided to revive the subject of Seymore when I went to dine.

As I shaved, splashed in an old zinc bath, and dressed, my thoughts wandered to George. The place was indeed dismal without him, but I must make the best of a bad job during the few days he was south. I had promised—and common sense approved the sanity of it—that I should refrain from any further offensive, or tours of exploration, or needless risks, till his return. But now that notion took on an irksome aspect. I desperately wanted to be up and doing : to have something concrete to show by the time George came back. I ran over in my mind last night's work, and it occurred to me that I had carried out my task of watching with amazing clumsiness. What, for example, was to prevent anyone from stationing an

assistant to watch this cottage and give the warning when I sallied forth? No; merely to explore the grounds and keep an eye on the Hall every hour or two, wasn't good enough; and I planned a better way. I decided to sleep in the Hall that night. With a little care I could surely cover my tracks so that it would appear I was spending the night as usual in the cottage. So during my solitary lunch I set my mind to the task of arranging my movements for that evening.

But my movements for that evening seemed likely to undergo drastic revision. For about five o'clock a messenger arrived with a telegram. It was from George, and was worded with typical Georgian precision: "*Travel London to-night. Meet you St. Pancras. Urgent. Staying Berkeley. George.*"

I gazed at the thing in amazement. What in the world could have happened? Had George been undergoing attentions similar to mine and stumbled on some explanation? His wire said plainly that he was staying at the Berkeley Hotel. It would take a traction-engine, as a rule, to drag George away from his comfortable flat to spend a night at a hotel, be it never so posh. Therefore there must be some good reason for the move. And what was the news he had for me? He gave no reasons for the order—merely "*Travel London to-night,*" with "*urgent*" as the compelling phrase that always clinched an instruction of this sort. I scribbled a few words assuring him I would come that night, travelling Midland and arriving at St. Pancras, and handed the wire to the messenger.

There was none too much time, and I started to pack at once, with very mixed feelings. I was of course glad that things had come to some sort of climax, but was sorry it hadn't happened here on the spot where the real battle of wits had taken place. Then, again, how long were we to be in London? George had left a considerable portion of

his kit here with me ; did he mean me to bring that south, together with my own ? I decided not ; if he'd meant that, he would have said so ; and I shoved enough things in a suit-case to do me three or four days, and lugged it out to the door.

I suppose Jessie stumbled over it and drew the obvious conclusion, for she burst into the sitting-room with a very troubled face. " Ye're never going away, sir ? "

" I'm afraid I am, Jessie."

" Oh, and you so happy here, and Mr. Collier coming back beside you—ye said he'd be back in a few days, sir."

" Yes, but I've got to go. It's most urgent. You see, it's Mr. Collier I'm going to. He's in London, and you may bet we'll be back together soon."

" Ah," smiled Jessie. " That's no' so bad. I thought ye were tired o' the place, or me no pleasing you wi' your meals——"

" Rubbish, Jessie," I laughed. " A London *chef* couldn't do us better."

" Ye're easier to do for nor the auld laird," sighed Jessie with pleasure. " So I'll keep the cottage aired and hae both your beds ready."

" That's right. We may be back any day. By the way, how is Mr. Seymore ? I haven't seen him for a day or so. He's not away again ? "

" No, no," replied Jessie. " He was out this morning pent-penting away. He's aye at the penting."

A whimsical notion entered my mind. Unless I was mistaken, George's wire meant that something had happened, and the news must be good or he wouldn't be dragging me away from Brackenbridge. In short, we were now one up on Seymore. " Jessie," I said, " tell Mr. Seymore that I send him my kindest regards ! " And hoping he would appreciate the satire, I left her to perform her various duties and prepare supper ; and I

strolled in the direction of the Manse to bid Marget au revoir.

Marget's face, when she ran out to meet me in the hall, told me all I wanted to know, as far as news of her father went. The hall lamp was dim, but there was light enough to see trouble in her lovely eyes. I knew as well as if she had told me point blank that no word had yet reached her and that she was dreadfully distressed.

"I'm so glad you've come," she said in a low, agitated voice—"so glad."

Then I smelt tobacco smoke.

"But you've got a visitor!" I whispered. "Then I'll clear out. I can come back shortly."

"No, no," she said, clutching my arm. "You must not go—you must not."

"I don't want to intrude," I explained. "I don't mind coming later——"

"But you don't understand!—I want you to stay!" Her voice was excited, and there was a pleading note in it that I could not ignore.

"Why, of course then I'll stay if you say so. But tell me what's the trouble——"

"I'll explain later," she whispered. "Don't say any more just now. . . . Just come right in, Mr. Drysdale," she added in louder tones, and she led me down the passage into her father's study.

## CHAPTER XVII

### A LITTLE TALK ON THE TELEPHONE

THERE sat Mr. Seymore in front of a crisp fire, a cigar in his hand, and his head comfortably back in an arm-chair. The smile that leapt readily to his face when he caught sight of me was a fraction of a second too late. I had observed, in the scowl which it replaced, his real feelings about my intrusion.

"Ah, my dear Drysdale!" he cried affably. "Come in, my dear fellow." He waved to a chair. His familiar tones and his assumption of the part of host sent an ugly tingle down my spine. I felt for the first time that he was definitely inimical towards me; and implicit behind that pleasant mask of a smile I was conscious of a smouldering antagonism.

"I didn't know you were such a frequent visitor at the Manse," he said half-banteringly.

"I'm not," I replied. "I haven't been here for a couple of days."

"Why shouldn't he come here?" said Marget, with a brightness which she obviously didn't feel. "Are you suggesting there should be a chaperone when Dad's away?"

"May I offer my services?" said Seymore blandly. "I would make an excellent one."

"Pooh!" I said. "I only came to——" and then I stopped. To admit that I had come to see if there was any news of Mr. Shaw would be giving away the fact that George and I suspected there was something unusual about Shaw's absence. "I only came to say good-bye," I concluded lamely.



"Good-bye?" cried Marget. "Whatever do you mean?"

"I travel to London to-night," I replied, and looked Seymore in the eye. If I expected him to blink, I was mistaken. I hoped that the news might convey to him that events had moved quicker than he expected, and that there was no longer any reason why I should remain at Brackenbridge. But his features showed nothing but a mild and polite surprise.

"This is very sudden," he remarked.

Well, he wouldn't catch me with that, for I was ready with an answer. "Oh, I don't know that it's so very sudden. I'm joining my friend Collier." "Put that in your pipe and smoke it," I added inwardly, "and even if you do know George's address it'll do you no good, for he's not staying at his flat." I said it inwardly, but my face must have shown the flicker of a smile, for he remarked:

"Well, you seem bucked about the projected visit anyway."

"I am rather," I said airily. "Of course I've enjoyed being at Brackenbridge, and I'm coming back again to enjoy it more."

"How soon?" came quickly from Marget.

"Perhaps not more than a few days. At any rate, I hope not. Collier and I have some business to transact. It should be rather jolly in London again."

"I hope to be there one of these days soon," said Seymore casually, as he rose to go. "We may meet."

"Rather," I agreed. "I believe you have my card with my London address, or you can get it from Jessie. Drop me a p.c. when you're coming."

"We may meet quite soon then," said Seymore smiling.

"I hope so," I returned. "Soon as you like!"

"Good night, Drysdale. What if I forget the p.c., eh? May I just drop in?"

"I'll be ready for you any time you like," I said looking at him square in the face. And I thought: "If that's not plain speaking, my friend, you must be deaf."

"Good night," I added aloud.

He smiled again and was gone.

Marget was back from the front door in an instant.

"Are you really going away?" she demanded eagerly.

She was close beside me and I could see a helpless expression in her eyes. "I hate to go away from you, Marget," I said with feeling; "but I've got to, this time."

She looked at me fixedly. For a moment I thought she was resenting the warmth of my tone, for I meant every word of it, and I am afraid I was looking at her in a way that was not exactly frigid. And then I saw I was wrong and that she was taking it all for granted. While I was keeping my promise not to speak of love to her again, it was a task beyond my power to hide the truth about my feelings, or to pretend that I had grown indifferent. Her strange look was explained the next moment.

"Ronny," she said frankly. "I'm glad you're going away. I've wanted you to go away all along, and I think you've had the pluck of fifty men to have stayed. It's such a relief to think you'll be—I don't know how to say it—you'll be out of harm's way!"

"That's not why I'm going!" I declared hotly. "Harm's way or not, I'd stay, but George has wired for me, and it's urgent." I paused. "Tell me this, Marget—I've never asked you before—but you must tell me frankly now. Why have you thought harm would come to me at Brackenbridge?"

That troubled look came back to her eyes. "It was something Dad said. When he heard that he had inherited Brackenbridge his words were—and I thought them queer at the time—'The old laird's dead; it will go hard with him that follows!' Oh, but there was more than that. I

knew there was some secret between Dad and the old laird—they both got so haggard and worried-looking. Dad, I think, wanted to help him, but couldn't. When I asked what the trouble was, Dad always put me off. And now I feel his going away has something to do with it ! ”

I patted her on the shoulder.

“ Ronny,” she said, then turned away with something that sounded almost like a sob. “ Ronny, oh, how I hate you going ! ”

“ Hate me going ? But why, Marget ? ” I was more than amazed at this sudden outburst : was it possible she cared for me after all ?

She dropped into an arm-chair and hid her face in her hands.

“ I was so afraid to-night. You've no idea how glad I was when I heard your voice at the door, asking Kirsty if I was in ! ”

“ Why, was that brute Seymore——”

She got to her feet impulsively.

“ Ronny, I hate that man ! I hate every inch of him. He always posed as our friend. Dad and he seemed to have heaps in common. But for weeks—months—I've felt he had something to do with the thing that was troubling the old laird and Dad. I felt he wasn't their friend. I've had to stifle that feeling ; Dad still seemed to be intimate with him. Or afraid of him, I don't know which. I felt, too, that he was connected with Dad's fear for your safety—that's why I ventured to warn you to be careful that day of the picnic. Oh, if you knew how I had grown to suspect that man ! And when he called to-night, I wish I could describe my feelings ! ”

“ You mean he was offensive to you or rude, Marget ? He wasn't trying to make love to you ? ”

“ No, not that at all. He just sat there and smiled at me as if I belonged to him, and the Manse were his. Dad

has always joked to me about his wanting to marry me, and said I must be pleasant to him. I was nice to Mr. Seymore for Dad's sake. But now I think I'm afraid of him too. Oh, Ronny, if that man dares to lay a hand on me I think I'll tear his eyes out."

"Would you like me to go and punch his head?" I demanded. It was a job I would have carried through with right good-will.

"You mustn't do anything so foolish. Why, what good would that bring?"

"It would make me frightfully happy," I said with a laugh. "Isn't that some good? Did he say anything about your father to-night?"

"He seemed most anxious to know if I had heard from him."

"And you haven't heard since that first note?"

Marget shook her head. "Not a line. Mr. Seymore could see I was worried, and he sat there and dragged it all out of me. The last thing I wanted to do was to confide in him, but he seemed keen to know when Dad would be back. Of course I couldn't tell him, and that's how it came out."

"And what did he say about it?"

"He was so beastly nice I could have—well, as you would put it, punched his head. He said I wasn't to worry—said Dad would be fearfully busy. I admitted, of course, he had gone to be beside a friend who was practically dying. Mr. Seymore said it was selfish of me to expect him to write in these circumstances. He said he'd help me all he could, and he wanted me to promise to come to him if I wanted any assistance whatever."

"And what did you say to that?"

"I didn't say anything. He could see I wasn't keen on his help, and said he supposed our young friend at the Hall had all my confidence these days. 'Not like the old days,' he said, as if I ever confided in the man! That's

why he didn't want you to-night, Ronny; he's jealous because we're pals."

"Let him continue—and I hope it keeps him off his sleep! Did he say anything more about Mr. Shaw?"

"He said he could write to a friend in Liverpool who would look up Dad's old chum. He told me not to worry any further. If I hadn't a queer dislike for Mr. Seymore, I'd have gone to bed to-night quite happy about Dad—he was so soothing about it all. As it is, I'm more worried than ever. Ronny, tell me really and truly, do you think anything has happened to my father?"

It was a ticklish position.

"Why are you hesitating?" she cried.

"I think Mr. Shaw is perfectly safe," I said slowly. Indeed, I had no reason to think otherwise. But the information about Seymore, and his anxiety that Marget should keep her mind at ease, set me on a new train of thought. Had the man some motive for doling out his soothing syrup to the girl? Did he know anything about Shaw's whereabouts? Did it suit his book for Shaw to be absent? And if so, in what way?

It had not occurred to me before that Seymore was in love with Marget, but apparently he had talked to Mr. Shaw about her either in jest or earnest. That it had pleased him to pay her attentions in the past because of her beauty and vivacity, I could understand; but I couldn't see Seymore really in love with anyone but Seymore. Possibly Mr. Shaw was bucked at the idea of a rich suitor, and had imagined there was more in it than there really was. Be that as it may, I was considerably rattled at the prospect of leaving Marget alone, with only old Kirsty as her protector against Seymore and his possible attentions, and with the only half-explained absence of her father causing her hourly worry.

"Look here, Marget," I said, "for two pins I won't

go to-night. It's clear somebody's got to look after you."

"You talk as if I were a kid," she replied hotly.

"Yes, but you might need advice—or help."

"And you may be certain I won't go to Mr. Seymore for it," she declared.

"Promise me you'll wire if you need me! I'll come right north at once."

"I know you will," she said softly. "I'd give anything to come with you just to get away from it all. I've had the dreadful feeling something was going to happen for weeks and weeks. And now I can't help thinking it has come. Ronny, tell me, do you think I ought to ask the police to help if Dad doesn't write soon?"

I deliberated the point well. If Shaw had really bolted either in fear or with ill-gotten gains, to warn the police was to stir up a lot of mud and draw much odious publicity on herself. Snapshotters from the picture papers would rout the place out in a jiffy. No, the police were out of the question.

"I have a better idea than that," I said. "Mr. Shaw probably hasn't written you for some good reason. Send me a wire to-morrow night, or first thing the following morning, if you don't hear, and I'll put a man on the job from London. Give me a note of the name of Mr. Shaw's old friend in Liverpool, and this man of mine will dig him out by hook or crook, and will report to me at once if your father is all right. That do?"

"A thousand thanks, Ronny," said Marget later, her hand in mine as we said good night. "You've been a good pal!"

"Good luck, old girl. Keep your pecker up. I'll be back perhaps sooner than you think!" And I turned in the darkness and made down the long garden path to the gate.



It was half-way down this path that I paused to listen. My ear had caught the sound of a footstep and the crackling of a twig. I was about to pass on, and put it down to a prowling dog or something of the sort; but with the rigorous days I had just lived through, some subconscious faculty was alert within me. The noise was not repeated. Marget had closed the front door, and all was quiet in the Manse. At the gate a fancy took me, and I opened it and gave it a loud bang, as if I had gone down the road. Then I stepped through the shrubbery and waited.

Was it merely a perambulating cat I had heard, or were my subconscious faculties right after all? From where I crouched amid the bushes, I had a view of the lawn in front, and the side of the house, with massed shrubbery and trees going back to the boundary wall. Two shafts of yellow light played into the darkness from Mr. Shaw's study, which I had just left. Nothing stirred. First one beam of light and then the other was shut off, which I took to be Marget or Kirsty pulling down the blinds. I was about to turn away and make for the gate again, when there was quite a distinct note of a snapping twig. The lawn was now in darkness, but I was just able to discern the figure of a man cautiously emerge from the bushes. He paused on the edge of the lawn.

But I did not pause. I saw that my only chance of learning his identity was to make a rush for him. He was spying, and I would treat him as a spy—he should have no mercy whoever he was. If he had a gun, I too had a gun; if he had a knife, I had two good fists; I must risk something. It would have taken much more than these chances to hold me back at that moment. Literally seeing red, I suddenly burst from my hiding-place and charged for him.

Like a leaping rabbit he was back in the shrubbery, and I had a good spread of lawn to cover. At the spot where he had dived in, I stopped to listen. There was not a sound of

him. I pushed into the bushes making as little noise as possible, thinking as much of the occupants of the Manse as the intruder whose blood I thirsted for. But he had got clear away by some path known best to himself. At length in disgust I gave it up. The man had been too clever for me, and I had under-estimated the length of that lawn.

“What the deuce was he doing there?” That was the first question I asked myself as I strolled back to my cottage. He may have been keeping watch on the Manse. “Or on Seymore,” I reflected. “Or on me!” Yes, and who the deuce was he? It surely wasn’t Seymore himself who had cut back on his tracks to watch Marget and me, and if possible, to overhear our talk? Or was it—I stopped on the road as the thought flashed to me—was it Shaw himself?

I felt positive I had hit upon the solution. Mr. Shaw hadn’t gone! He was hiding somewhere in the vicinity. There was some deep purpose behind his pretence of going off to Liverpool. The horrible suspicion crossed my mind that Marget knew all about it, and, to back up her father, had deceived even me; but I put that idea from my mind with scorn. If the figure I saw on the lawn was Shaw, then I was satisfied that Marget knew nothing about it.

As I champed Jessie’s excellent supper, I turned the matter over from every point of view. By the time I was ready to set out for St. Eildon, and had got the car round, and put my suit-case on the seat beside me, I would have staked my last farthing that I had hit upon at least one hard fact about the Reverend Duncan Shaw’s sudden departure.

I remembered just in time that I was to have dined with Smith of Black Edge the following evening, so I wrote a note of apology, and scribbled a line asking Jessie to have it delivered as soon as possible.

I drove to St. Eildon to catch the London express in an unpleasant frame of mind. The more I thought of that figure on the lawn, and Marget unprotected in the Manse, the more upset I felt. Whether it was Shaw or not, I hated the idea of leaving her at the very time when she needed the support of a friend. I parked the car at a hotel garage, and lumped my suit-case over to the station. There was a good half hour before my train, and I strolled back to the hotel for a good large whisky and soda which might aid slumber on the journey. Taking my drink to a corner of the smoking-room, I chewed the stem of my pipe. What a cad I was not to insist that she should get some friend to stay with her!—or, rather, what a fool not to think of it before! Failing that, had she no relatives she could go to—no friends in Edinburgh? If the worst came to the worst, I could have taken her to London with me, and she could have stayed with a sort of maiden aunt of mine at Streatham. My eye wandered to a telephone-box in the corridor. There were such things as trunk calls. I jumped to my feet.

By jove, I'd do it! I'd put through a 'phone call to George at the Berkeley Hotel in London, and ask if my presence there could be dispensed with for twenty-four hours more! I'd explain how matters stood: George would see the common humanity of it. George would understand.

I don't know whether it was the urgency and insistence of my tone, or whether the traffic on the wires was slack that night, but within seven minutes I was talking to the clerk at the Berkeley demanding the presence of Mr. George Collier at the telephone if he was to be found in the hotel at that moment.

"Mr. Collier?" repeated the clerk.

"Yes. He's staying there."

"One moment, sir. . . . There is no Mr. Collier on the hotel register, sir."

"There must be," I insisted. "He's staying there to-night."

"He has not booked his room yet, sir. There is a wire here for a gentleman of that name," added the clerk.

Then I swore softly to myself. If George had left his flat, for some good reason, to stay in the Berkeley, wasn't it possible he might take the precaution of registering under another name? It was more than possible, it was probable. "Thanks, it's all right," I said, and rang off, and the next moment I had banged through another trunk call, this time to George's flat. It occurred to me as just possible he wasn't leaving there till late; in that case, with luck, I might catch him before he went.

I glanced at my watch in a cold sweat. The minute hand had crept round. There was barely ten minutes before my train was due. If there was a snag on the wires, I must either give up the call as a bad job or miss the express. With sinking heart I gazed at the second hand of my watch as it went in its tireless circles. Sixty seconds was but a flash of time, and five minutes went in the winking of an eye. The 'phone bell whirred musically, and I leapt to the instrument, pulling close the door.

I think I must have given a whoop of joy as George's cheery "Hullo!" sang over the wire, for he repeated it half a dozen times and demanded to know who spoke.

"Oh, Ronny! Splendid. How goes it, old son?"

"George! George! I've just a second to catch my train. Don't interrupt till I tell you everything. I simply can't leave Marget Shaw in that house for another night. I can't do it, old boy. Now, does it matter if I don't travel south till to-morrow night? By that time I'll have made arrangements."

"What the blazes are you talking about?" George shouted.

"Haven't you heard?" I groaned.

"Every word," said George.

"Well," I cried, "I know it's urgent, or you wouldn't have wired me to come, but I want to know——"

"Wired you? You're mad!" bellowed George's voice.  
"I sent you no wire."

I gasped into the transmitter. "Great heavens, you didn't? Well, someone did and signed it 'George.'"

"It's a plant, old thing. By thunder, it's luck you 'phoned. Shaw home yet?"

"No."

"Well, you get back quick! But for heaven's sake watch your own skin, for I'll swear there's something doing at Brackenbridge."

## CHAPTER XVIII

### NIGHT

I TOTTERED out of that telephone-box with my brain humming like an upset hive of bees. Paying my trunk call dues to a weary-eyed waitress, I made for the station. It had never occurred to me to suspect that the wire might be a fake. They clearly meant to get me out of the way for twenty-four hours at least, and took this means of effecting it. Perhaps at this very moment, activities were afoot at Brackenbridge, the nature of which I could not guess. And that man in the Manse garden: ten to one I was the object of his vigil, and he had been sent to watch me, to make quite certain that I went by this train. I looked round me as I entered the station—probably I was being spied upon at this very moment! I had already bought my ticket, and as I passed through the barrier and picked up my suit-case the express roared into the station.

I thought quickly. To turn tail and make a bolt for it was to advertise the fact to any watchers who were there that I had discovered their trick. I scanned the people on the platform. There was quite a handful of travellers, some with friends, some alone. It was impossible to pick one or another as the person possibly detailed to see me safely on the road to London. But that two eyes were carefully watching me I made no doubt. I stepped into the sleeping car, and loudly asked the attendant if he had a vacant berth.

The attendant had. He took me to it. I slipped half a crown in his hand and asked him to reserve it for me, as I



was going to speak to a friend at the other end of the train for half an hour. "Drysdale's the name," I added, and moved quickly down the corridor. A whistle blew. Now was my time. I stuck my head out. The other track was clear. As the train started to move, I opened the door at the end of the corridor and dropped; and by the time the train had cleared the platform I was through the wicket gate at the other side of the station. I chuckled hugely to myself. For someone was away to Brackenbridge with the news that Drysdale had gone south.

I allowed a good half hour to pass before I made any further move. Then, satisfied that the coast would be clear, I went back to the garage and retrieved the two-seater. The mechanic, to whom I had handed it over an hour before, crawled out from below the car he was working on and blinked at me.

"Ye didnae miss the train?" he queried.

"I'm not travelling to-night after all," I told him.

"Then ye're lucky finding me here—if it werenae for this rush job I'm on, I'd hae been awa' hame and the place shut. Ye said ye were leaving it here for twa-three days."

"Well, I've changed my plans."

"Oh, while I mind about it, did your friend get ye at the station?"

"My friend?"

"Aye, just after ye'd gone, a man drove up and asked if this was Maister Drysdale's car. 'Aye,' I says, 'that's the name.' 'Oh,' says he, and drives off, for to see ye at the station like enough."

I laughed. "Thanks," I said, "for mentioning it. Yes, he saw me at the station all right." Just as I suspected, I had been followed. And the watcher had been testing at every point whether I had really gone. Well, he was pretty clever if he spotted my little manœuvre at the station!

I got the old bus refilled with petrol ; and wending my way out of the little town, I headed towards the Lammermuirs, with the wind from the hills fresh on my cheek. As I neared Brackenbridge, I turned off sharply and made a detour, so that I could approach it from the opposite direction, and reach the Hall without passing through the village. Three or four hundred yards from home I switched off the lights. Opening a gate I ran the car into a field. A clump of embowering trees made a shelter and a canopy. I put up the hood against the chance of rain, transferred my little automatic from the suit-case to my pocket, and left the car to pass the night with the tinkling of a quiet burn to keep it company.

My first destination was the Manse. For Marget to know I was in Brackenbridge, and ready to help her, might ease her mind. In any case all my instincts as her protector were aroused, and there was a keen satisfaction in the thought that she had learned to rely on me and trust me. An upstairs window to the front still showed a light. I softly entered the garden and standing on the lawn flung up a handful of small gravel.

A corner of the blind was pulled back. Then the light went out, and I heard the window softly opening.

“ Who is there ? ”

It was Marget’s voice, and very strange it sounded. The tone was not at all the tone she had used to me on our last meeting.

“ It’s I—Ronny ! ”

There was an exclamation from above, half of surprise, half of joy, which was pleasant to my ears.

“ Ronny ! You’ve come back ! ”

“ I’m not going to London,” I whispered up to her. “ I’ll tell you about it to-morrow.”

“ No, no ; I must hear now. I’m coming down.”

In a minute or two I heard the key quietly grinding in

the front door, and I waited outside the porch. There was a faint glimmer of moonlight which caught the polished door-handle; the glimmer moved; and I gathered that the door was opening. In the dense black frame of the hall behind her, Marget appeared, her face a pale oval, with eyes wide and eager, and her lips parted. There was just light enough to see that she was wrapped in a black dressing-gown, and that her hair was over her shoulders in two long braids. The door she pulled softly behind her, and she came to me quickly and held out her hand.

“Ronny!”

And she drew me into the porch.

“Ronny, I feel an abandoned wretch coming down to you like this. But I am dying to hear your news. Tell me, what’s happened! You gave me such a fright. I thought it was Dad come back.” Her voice ran on excitedly. “Why aren’t you in the train? Have you put off going till the morning?”

“I’m not going at all. I——”

“But why, but why? Oh, I can guess the reason! Ronny, I’ll never forgive you,” she whispered desperately. “You’ve come back for my sake.”

“Listen, Marget,” I said calmly. “I can tell you it all in a second if you’ll only listen. At St. Eildon I rang up George in London to see if I could come south to-morrow instead. George hadn’t wired me at all! It was a fake. Probably the idea was merely to get me away from Brackenbridge. So I’ve come back.”

“The wire was——” She caught her breath. “But why? I can see no reason. Why should anybody want you away? Ronny, it’s wrong of you to come back—you should have gone all the same. Promise me you’ll take the first train in the morning! Anything to get away from—there!” She pointed through the darkness towards Brackenbridge Hall.

"I'll promise no such thing," I said slowly. "I do not leave Brackenbridge till you do. When I see you safely away beside friends, then I'll think about it."

"But how can I go away?" Her voice trembled. "I must wait here and see about Dad—he might return home any time and need me. No, Ronny, you go—go and leave me. I can look after myself. Don't go back there to-night, I beg of you. Go to the inn instead."

"Nonsense," I said with a laugh which I hoped was careless. "It's sweet of you worrying about me. But I discovered the trick in time to save me a wild-goose chase to London. Now I mean to find out the why and wherefore of it."

"What do you mean to do?" Marget asked.

"Before that wire came, I had made up my mind to sleep in the Hall to-night. I'm going to carry that through, although I can't guarantee there will be much sleep."

"There will be no sleep for me," said Marget, wearily. "Ronny, for heaven's sake go to the inn."

"Do you want to make me into a white-livered funk?" I asked hotly.

"You're not that," she murmured. "I didn't mean that."

"Then don't ask me to act like one," I retorted. "Don't ask me to clear out and leave everything like a beastly coward."

She bit her lip, and I saw a tear glittering in each eye. Even in the shadows of the porch I saw these two round tears, and watched them run down her cheeks, and I reproached myself. To see her thus upset was too much for frail human flesh to support in silence.

"Marget!" I whispered, taking her hands gently. "Marget, I wouldn't vex you for the world. You know I love you, my dear."

She had turned away her face, and now she put her hand over my mouth.

"I'll forgive you for that," she whispered back, and I pressed her hand against my mouth and kissed it hungrily. Then with a quick little gesture she slipped her arms round my neck.

"And you must forgive me for this!" Her voice was so low I could scarcely hear her words, and her moist lips were on mine, and her slim body quivering close within my arms.

The next instant she was gone, and the door softly shut; I was alone before the empty porch with the memory of that moment's sweetness dazzling my dull brain.

My automatic was safe in my pocket. That was the main point I ascertained before shinning over the wall not many yards from the spot where George and I made our first entrance to the Hall. But my progress towards the house was slower to-night; for though I knew the lie of the land, I was also more cautious, dire experience having made me wise.

I stuck to the trees and shrubbery. In their shelter, I worked my way round to the back of the Hall, crossing the front drive at one quick leap. The back avenue, beyond which lay the gardener's cottage, was bordered by a deep belt of evergreens. Among these I wriggled forward and took a survey. There was no sound except the leaves and a branch tapping stupidly on the wall, and nothing moved save the soft pulse of the wind. Another jump, and I was across the back avenue. Tangled bushes barred my way, and I was tempted to step on the path and walk boldly in the open. But I had gained too good an advantage that night already to throw it all away by mere discomfort. So I clapped down on my face and went round the roots of these bushes like a rat. Thank good-

ness, the doorway of the cottage was in shadow, and I was inside, breathing hard in the pitch dark passage, as quietly as though I had come through the keyhole. The key belonging to the back door of the Hall was in the locked cupboard ; and I found myself back in the bushes, so far well satisfied with the progress of my plan of operations.

Faint moonlight etched the gables of the Hall against the stars and bustling clouds. The outhouses round the courtyard at the back were soaked in shadowed gloom. I crept to the edge of the shrubbery, and then at a crouching run crossed the path. Close to the wall was a sanctuary of darkness ; and my elbow brushing the stones as I passed, I reached the back door, and listened intently once more. If there was another soul in these grounds beside myself, he had kept mighty silent.

It was the same inside the Hall. When I had shut and locked the door behind me—the lock swung smoothly back—I stood, shoes in hand, and held my breath. There was a stillness like the vast quietude of a church. Tip-toeing down the passage I entered the hall. The smell of the house enwrapped me, the quaint smell of a big house in the country, but with a mouldy old-bookish tang to it, the smell of a hundred years ago. I fancied that my straining ears caught the faint stir of insects, and the pattering scurry of mice barely audible against the nerve-assailing background of deadly silence. It must have been the blood rushing through my head, but I seemed to hear that silence roaring to the roof and through distant empty passages, like the roaring of a sea-shell in your ear. But these fancies were unsettling. I shook myself, and, keeping close to the wall, I reached the foot of the stairs and mounted.

There is nothing so wearing as to keep one faculty concentrated to its uttermost without a break. Creeping up step by step, I was all the while listening with every



ounce of strength, and by the time I reached the top I was quite limp with the strain. My ears were now attuned to the stillness. I could separate the sounds I heard, the rubbing of leaves on the big coloured window that lit the staircase by day, the wind in the trees, and a dim rhythmic creak which I took to be a loose cowl on a chimney. But of other sounds there were none. I was so certain I was alone in the house that for two pins I'd have strolled along the corridor humming aloud.

But I was running no risks of that sort. Though I could have taken my oath I had entered the Hall unknown to anyone, there was the hundredth chance that I was wrong. The library seemed light after the pitch blackness of the corridor, for the curtains were furled back and the blinds were up. If I had expected to find any swift silent activities afoot, I was disappointed. Leaving the door ajar, I went into the next room, and prepared to make myself as comfortable as possible for my vigil.

It was a great gloomy room. Even with a midday sun belching in, that room must have been depressing. It had been the old laird's bedroom, and the outlines of a huge four-poster bed glimmered in the corner. The furniture was in proportion to the room, bulky towering stuff reared against the walls. I pulled the quilt from the bed and lay down on the couch that stood at the foot of it. And again that awful silence got me by the throat. It beat against my ears till I thought my head would burst.

I shut my eyes and conjured up a picture of a warm sleeping-compartment, rocking slightly as it rushed through the night air towards London; and for a moment I cursed myself for having put through the trunk call that stopped me in time. Then I pictured a slim figure in a black silk dressing-gown, with bronze braids over her shoulders, and eyes wearied with anxiety, and I knew it was well that I was in Brackenbridge. More than that, I

had scored a point against my enemies, and, unless I were far mistaken, was on the threshold of discoveries that would lay bare the very thews and sinews of their mysterious operations.

I must have dozed, if I didn't actually sleep, but for how long I could not estimate. At any rate, I found myself suddenly sitting upright with a jerk, and broad awake. I had heard a noise somewhere in the house, and I slipped aside the eiderdown and got to my feet. The bedroom door I had left open, so that the slightest sound would attract my attention, and I crept out into the passage and waited. I could hear nothing further, and I ventured to approach the library. Inside all was still. I stepped into the room, and could discern no movement. It was the same in the hall when I looked down over the banisters. Had I fallen asleep on the couch and dreamed the sound that had stirred me? I went back to the bedroom determined that my imagination should not repeat the trick. A few false alarms like this and I should be a mere bundle of leaping nerves.

This time I did not lie down. Putting the quilt round my knees, I sat alert. I could not have been more than ten minutes in this position before I heard the sound again. There was no doubt about it. The noise was clearly discernible, and came from a distant part of the house.

In a trice I was at the door, my hand in my jacket pocket closed over the butt of my automatic. It was comforting to grip the thick grooved steel, warm from my body. And I needed all the comfort I could get, for my heart was thudding in erratic pulsations, and the very air around me felt cold and damp. Then a footstep broke the silence.

I had been about to go down the corridor, but now I paused. The footsteps, faint and all but inaudible, were

coming towards me. Now they would stop, and then come on a few more paces. The corridor was in dense darkness. To scratch a match meant giving the advantage to the other man. I decided to wait.

I held the whip-hand ; for I knew of his presence, while he was ignorant of mine.

If he were going into the bedroom, I could either let crash with my fists as he passed, or shove my pistol into the small of his back and make no bones about telling him my intention.

The footsteps approached nearer and nearer. Then I heard the feet go softly on a wooden floor and knew he had entered the library. In my stockinged feet, I made for the door and listened. In the room I could hear nothing. Except for the strip of polished wood round the edge, the library carpet was thick and dulled one's steps. I put out my hand, felt the edge of the open door, and stepped into the room.

It was darker than when I had seen it last. Only a grey glimmer came from the two windows ; and of the rest of the room there was nothing to be seen. A figure was slowly crossing the floor. It paused at the window, and I stemmed a cry in time. The figure was that of a girl.

I stepped forward, unable to believe my eyes. Was it a figment of my over-stimulated brain, or did I really see a girl, tall and slender, in that faint grey glow at the window ?

" Marget ! " I whispered. " Marget ! "

With a quick movement, the girl disappeared into the darkness beyond. At a bound I followed her. She was now close against the bookshelves. I could just discern her white face.

" Marget," I repeated, and stepped forward, hand outstretched, and found myself gripping her arm.

With a jerk she was free, and half-way across the room,

before I realized it. And at the same moment there were other footsteps in the room, and I heard a sudden soft explosive sound. It was a sound I knew in a sort of instinctive way to be the discharge of a powerful air-pistol. For it was muffled and quiet, unlike the sharp crack of a revolver. There was simultaneously a thud in the bookshelf an inch above my head. I swerved and ducked, and felt my foot slipping on the polished floor. I made an effort to recover my balance, failed, and went down with a ringing smash. My head seemed cleft in two, there was a burst of sparks before my eyes, for a flickering instant of time I felt deadly hot, and I knew no more.

## CHAPTER XIX

### MY NEW FRIEND SMITH

**D**AWN was grey in the windows when I opened my eyes. My head was aching so badly I could hardly see, and it was a few minutes before I could collect my scattered wits and take in my surroundings. I put up my hand and found a beautiful cut on the back of my head, my hair clogged stiff with blood, and a corner of the heavy fender showing clear traces of how my senses had been knocked out of me. I must have lain there for a few hours, and now I was cold and miserable. I had not lost much blood, but when I got to my feet I found I was unsteady, and had to drop into the arm-chair at my side, with the room spinning hazily.

Marget in the library last night ! That memory brought me up with a jerk. I had been positive at the moment of seeing her that it was Marget ; no doubts of it had crossed my mind ; yet now looking back, I knew for certain I was wrong. She was not so tall as Marget, though at the first glance she had seemed to be ; the arm I had gripped was slighter than Marget's. And now I come to think of it, I had felt rings on that hand ; and Marget's hands, I had noticed often, were beautiful in their ringless simplicity. If that girl were not Marget—and I was now quite definite on the point—who in the name of creation was she ?

And she was not alone. Just before the firing of that pistol, I had heard other steps in the room, but had seen nothing because my back was to the door. And in any case the room had been too dark for me to have made out the features of anyone, unless they had been close to the

pale glimmering light at a window. I got to my feet and examined the bookshelves above the level of my head. There was a neat hole drilled in the wood. Well, it had not missed me by much. Say a foot lower, and my light would have assuredly been out.

Then it dawned on me that they had probably left me for dead. It was the instant after he had fired that I swerved to avoid a possible second shot, and came a purler on the polished wooden floor. Undoubtedly they thought the bullet had got me through the head, and they had probably bolted from the place. For the room seemed to be untouched. I went through all the house, pulling myself wearily along the passages in the gathering light, and found everything normal. My presence last night must have come as a horrid shock to them, and in the heat of the moment one of them had fired in anger or in terror lest I should discover their identity. I saw the situation clearly, and it amused me to think that the laugh was still on my side. For I was alive and kicking—and ready to kick more before the end—and their object was, as far as appearances went, still unaccomplished.

My exit from the Hall was by no means the secretive business that my entrance had been. I locked the back door and went straight to my cottage. With water heated on a spirit lamp I bathed the wound on my scalp ; it was smaller than I thought, but it stung venomously. While I was bathing it, my eyes lit upon the letter I had written Mr. Smith of Black Edge Farm asking to be excused from dining with him. Now there was no need to back out ; I tore it up with a feeling of pleasant relief, for I looked forward to seeing Smith again. And then I toppled into bed and slept.

I looked forward to seeing Smith again ; I looked forward immensely. The crude and painful episode of



my first visit to Black Edge was the only jarring chord, but that had faded since Smith's morning call yesterday. Now that George was away, Smith was the only man in Brackenbridge I felt I could talk to with any freedom ; at any rate, he looked like becoming an amusing companion. To be sure, I had killed his dog, but the fault had not been mine ; and as nobody knew the truth about the incident, I felt it was in the meantime better forgotten. I should have to become very intimate with the man before I could admit that his dog had come by its death in an attempt to floor me on the heather. And I hoped indeed that day would come soon, for to hide the truth from a fellow one cares anything about is always nauseating.

I slept till four in the afternoon, and rose feeling a new man. The traces of a headache and a pain at my wound were the only reminders of the night. But even these wore off as I splashed in a cold tub, and ate a hearty tea—or, rather, breakfast. It had been a blazing fine day and the evening fell warm. I retrieved the car from its alfresco garage among the trees along the road, and made for the hills with a degree of pleasure and anticipation.

I had looked forward to a difficult climb, but I was agreeably surprised. The hill-road into which I turned was rough, but quite passable, and it wound back and forwards, dodging knolls and gulleys, so that the gradient was easy. I could have driven a big limousine up there without a moment's worry. Soon I swung round a corner to find the road dropping away and a big gate on my right. The sun was now low over the hills to the west, the air clear and still ; and when I got out to open the gate, I had an impulse to walk over to the fence that ran round the pitted edge of that precipice of grim memories.

I found myself looking down two hundred feet into a little valley of singular charm. It was thick with trees and flowering broom, and right below me the burn ran deep

and black between banks of tumbled rocks. To the left the ground opened out ; but to the right the ground closed in upon the burn till there was a narrow gorge, and beyond it a blue hint of the distant valley of the Tweed. I was glad of that sight of the place in a day devoid of mist, with the setting sun making long shadows and imparting an air of peace ; and I closed the gate behind me and drove towards the belt of pinewoods in high spirits.

I was tickled at my reception. As I drew up to the gate leading into the farm-yard I observed Josef, the fellow I had had words with. When he heard the car he was over the yard in a trice to let me in. I have seldom seen a man with a more doleful expression ; he looked as if the bottom had fallen out of his world ; and I had no doubt that Smith had been recompensing his excess of zeal in a way that spelt sorrow for Josef.

He touched his forelock dutifully, closed the gate, and ran forward to open the door of the car. He carefully lifted out my mackintosh, which I had flung down, and led the way through a small gate round to the front of the farm-house.

“ How are you, my dear fellow ! Delighted to see you.” Mr. Smith got up from a deck-chair in the rustic porch and extended a welcoming hand. “ I wish you’d come to eat with me every day if you could bring such weather.” He pointed across to the opposite hillside, still and calm in the last glow of sunset. “ And now you’re just in time for a short drink and a cigarette before dinner.” Smiting a bell, he gave the order to a pale-faced manservant in a white jacket who walked, I observed, with a limp. “ That’s James. He was the odd-job man in a house I once had in Surrey ; he’s as bucked as anything when I bring him here to do the cooking and so on,” said Smith after the drinks had been brought. “ By the way, would you like to see over the place ? ”

I said I'd like to see it very much, and in a few minutes he led the way into the dusk of the tiny square hall. "It wasn't so dilapidated as I thought when I rented it," said Smith. "I had to get a new floor put down in the passage, and a plasterer was here about a week tinkering at the walls and ceilings. I haven't touched the upper story at all. Don't need it. Here's the smoking-room." He turned in to the right and lit a candle that stood on a table by the door. It was rather like a club-house lounge, with mats on the floor and comfortable-looking basket chairs. "It's as warm as I want in winter," continued my host. "I sometimes live up here in winter if there's a crisp dry spell. It's your damp and fogs that go for my old bellows and send me off to Cannes with a temperature. This is the dining-room." He crossed the hall.

"By jove!" I exclaimed, "you've got this done up to some tune. I think it's top-hole."

Smith smiled with appreciation. "You should have seen it before!"

It was simply furnished with some old dark oak things, and the subdued brown paper on the wall gave it just the right setting. Dinner was laid. The cutlery and glasses shone bright on the polished table in the light of some tall candles.

"It's as plain as can be, but rather jolly," said Smith. "Ah, here is James. Let us take our places." It was an excellent Burgundy he produced; the grilled trout and roast lamb were cooked with a delicacy that showed how well James knew his job. He anticipated one's needs, and at the right moment made himself scarce. The pleasant cigar and thimbleful of cognac which followed reminded me more of the Carlton than of the Lammermuir Hills, and I said so.

Smith laughed, tugging his short, pointed beard, his wide brown eyes lighting up. "It's James," he said. "He

insists. I'm a simple sort of bloke myself—a crust on the hillside and I'm happy. But James is an artist on food, and he practises his effects on me."

"I congratulate you on having such a man," I said. "Talking of artists reminds me of that artist-fellow Seymore."

"Ah," cried Smith, "two minds with a single thought! I was just about to mention his name. We spoke of him yesterday. Did you say you knew him well?"

"I haven't known him long, of course," I replied, "but I've seen a fair amount of him in the time. I don't remember whether you said he was a pal of yours or not, but——"

"Not at all," put in Smith. "By no means. He's dropped in here about half a dozen times all told in the last year or so. That's about all. I was quite taken with the man, and he's got some interesting yarns about the East. But he doesn't seem to want to be—what shall I say?—'matey.' I can't quite make him out, and haven't tried to. But I'm sorry—I interrupted you."

"No, I was only going to ask if you knew anything about the man. I thought you might be able to help me. As a matter of fact, I've taken a good old royal hatred of the fellow."

Smith opened his eyes. "What on earth has he been doing? Have you had a row with him?"

"No," I said. "I can't explain it."

"He struck me as an inoffensive sort of beggar. Always messing about with a box of colours. I thought him a bit moody though, and put that down as the reason I never got to know him any better. Has he been giving you cheek, or been crusty with you, or something?"

"Nothing like that," I replied. "It's simply that I don't trust him. I don't mind confiding in you, because I know it won't go any further; and, after all, up here you're

out of the arena. But, confidentially, I think he's got some dirty work in hand. I don't know if you're interested. If so, I'll go on."

"Dirty work?" Smith put his elbows on the table. "I'm very interested, though I don't know what you mean by dirty work. But if I can be of help you can count on me."

I looked round to make sure the door was shut. "By dirty work I mean this. Since I've come to Brackenbridge I've had three damned narrow escapes from being finished off."

"What?" Smith's bright brown eyes were wide and unwinking in the steady candlelight. "How on earth—you mean, of course, accidents? You don't mean——"

"I do. Two of them were deliberate attempts to lay me out. The first time it was a knife. The second it was by rifle bullets. The third time happened last night, but that possibly was unpremeditated, though perhaps the narrowest squeak of the lot."

Smith's forehead puckered in horror and surprise. Then he shook his head. "My dear chap, you can't be serious, That sort of thing isn't done nowadays. Is there a catch in it somewhere—if so, let's have the joke."

"It's a pretty grim joke," I said abruptly.

"You mean it's true?" demanded Smith incredulously. "Good God, man, the thing's monstrous! Where's the object? What's the point of it?"

"That's what I would like to know."

Smith pulled slowly at his cigar.

"Tell me all about it," he said. "How exactly did these things happen?"

I related baldly and briefly the circumstances of that evening in the cottage as well as my fishing expedition up the burn. "And last night," I concluded, "I was in the

library of the Hall when I was shot at in the dark. The weapon I think was an air-pistol."

"You stagger me!" Smith put down his cigar, and ran his fingers through his hair nervously. "Of course you've told all this to the police?"

I shook my head. "That's not the way to lay 'em by the heels."

"You're probably right. Yes; I think the police would do no good, except make a bungle of it. But tell me—you said something about Seymore. . . . Do you mean you connect Seymore in any way with these extraordinary attacks?"

"No, I don't go that length. All I say is there's something queer about the man." I paused and wondered whether I should relate the whole of the events since I had come to Brackenbridge—my uncle's will, our seeing Seymore that night in the library, and so on. While I hesitated Smith cut in with:

"You mean you can't see any connexion, but you feel there is one all the same?"

"Exactly. Though I must say it's all mighty obscure."

Smith refilled our tiny glasses with cognac, and sipped his thoughtfully.

"I can't see Seymore in the picture somehow," he said at length. "In the first place, he could have no earthly motive in wishing you ill. Besides, I don't honestly believe he has it in him!"

"I'm not so certain about that."

"Well, I can see him dithering about with a paint-box, and spinning yarns about Shanghai, but I can't see him running knives into people."

"Possibly not. I don't say I'm laying too much stress on the Seymore idea."

"Do you know," said Smith, lying back and tilting his chair, "I do believe it's some half-baked lunatic who's



got a grudge against you. It's the only reasonable explanation I can think of. Some village idiot from the district who's got an anarchistic germ in his blood. A sort of 'Down with all landlords' obsession. You, being the laird here, are the handiest landlord for him to go for."

"Well, it's mighty uncomfortable. But I'll get him yet, though I wait a year."

"What worries me about that," declared Smith, "is that he might get you first!"

"Well, jolly good luck to him!"

"It's you who needs the luck," said Smith grimly. "If I were you, Drysdale, I'd clear out and let the lunatic blow off his steam on someone else. I know if I had that sort of thing hanging over me, I'd be in a mortal funk day and night."

"To be frank," I blurted out boldly, "I am. But that doesn't make any difference. I'm not clearing out till there's a bit of clearing up done first."

Smith nodded slowly, and twisted his liqueur glass in his long fingers.

"You mean you're really going to stick it?" he said at length. "No persuasion from a pal——"

"I'm going to stick it to the end!" I banged the table with my fist in sudden vehemence. "I tell you, Smith, I won't clear out for man or devil——"

"You won't alter your mind?"

"I tell you I'm going to see it through!"

"It's a pity," murmured Smith slowly.

"Why is it a pity——"

The rest of the sentence was a mere gurgle in my throat. For Smith had suddenly pulled open a drawer in front of him. And now he was leaning forward, gazing at me. His eyes seemed to have narrowed to brown pin-points of light. And in his hand was a revolver that was pointing between my eyes.

“ My friend ! ”

His voice was hard and metallic ; the easy drawl had gone, the Bohemian air thrown off.

“ My friend, if you will not clear out of your own accord, you must be cleared out. You have had three warnings. You have taken none of them.”

He suddenly looked past me over my shoulder and nodded.

The door must have been silently opened behind me. For at Smith's nod a cloth was thrown round my face. And hands gripped my wrists and ankles. I kicked and struggled, but in a couple of minutes was bound and helpless on the floor. Then I was picked up and carried out by strong hands. The last thing I heard in that room was a laugh. Smith had said some words and there was laughter in reply : low malicious laughter that made me tingle with bursting rage. For of a sudden, I recognized it. The laughter was Seymore's.

## CHAPTER XX

### THE BEAUTIFUL LADY

I TOOK little stock of what happened to me during the next ten minutes ; I was too shaken up for any kind of consecutive thought. I had been tricked—tricked by an amazingly clever man—and the utter surprise of Smith's last move had left me winded. When I got my breath, as it were, hurt pride writhed and rankled within me. I had beaten them so far ; last night I scored a decisive point, or at least I had prevented them from scoring ; and now I had gone and botched everything. Like a stupid fly I had run right into the spider's web, and of course the spider was on me in a flash. Fool, fool, I kept saying to myself—wasn't my first experience at Black Edge enough to warn anybody but an idiot that something was wrong ? That dog, that yellow-faced ruffian : these weren't there for nothing. And how beautifully I had swallowed Smith's explanations ; how like a babe had been my acceptance of his invitation ! A glib tongue, an easy manner, and it was all over.

Then I began to realize what had happened to me. The place was in pitch darkness, and I was sitting on a box with my legs tightly lashed to it. My back was against a wooden pillar, and my arms were locked round it, my wrists roped together. In fact I was as closely imprisoned as if I had been in the Bastille. The cloth had been taken from my face and I recollected how a growling voice had threatened that if I squealed there was a nice little gag ready which it would be a great joy to insert. But what was the use of shouting ? I was miles from anywhere, in one of

the loneliest spots in the Lammermuirs. In the darkness I could see nothing except a few stars that glimmered in a tiny crack high on the wall. Estimating from the distance I had been carried, I concluded I was locked up in one of the barns.

The minutes passed, and seemed to lengthen into hours. My hands and feet grew numb with the tightly bound cords that gripped me. Vainly I searched for a mode of escape, but everything came back to the indisputable fact : I was helpless. A gust of sudden anger shook me, and I tore at my bonds with every ounce of strength. If I could slightly loosen the cords, I might pull out one hand and so free myself. It was just possible there was a careless knot somewhere that might be slipped. I tugged and bent and twisted, a wild rage against my captors giving me the strength of two men. Soon the sweat was pouring from my face, and every muscle ached as if it had been beaten with a heavy stick. I think I went mad for ten minutes.

But it was all useless. The cords held firm. These knots had been tied by no amateur. Exhausted, I lay back against the wooden beam and gasped for breath. And then I heard footsteps and voices.

Heavy boots rang on the cobbles of the farm-yard, but I could make nothing of the voices at all. There was the opening and shutting of some distant doors, and of a sudden one voice seemed to ring out above the others. I recognized it immediately. It was undoubtedly the voice of Shaw, the minister.

At this, another surge of wild wrath set me trembling. So this was where he had disappeared to ! He was in league with Seymore and Smith ! It was the hands of these three that had been against me all along. It was these three who for some obscure reason of their own desired my discomfiture ! Well, they had got it. Eagerly I longed for that rascal of a clergyman to come in to me here :

to show himself before the lash of my angry tongue. Better still to have five minutes with him alone, and just my fists to tackle him with ; but even to tell him what I thought of him and his arch-roguers would have given me solace. It would at any rate have been a few bright moments to look back on during the long hours of the night that had already fallen.

His voice rang out again. Heavens, I was wrong ! I was on the wrong track altogether ! The voices and footsteps were fading, and I could still hear Shaw's voice above the others. But he was not issuing orders. He was speaking in a loud tone of protest. The other voices were muttering angrily and impatiently, but Shaw spoke with a note of shrill and impassioned complaint ; and though I could catch no words, it was at once evident to me that he was in the same box as myself—helpless. A door slammed and shut off further sounds.

It was all explained now : he was a prisoner here like myself ! His letter to Marget about his Liverpool journey certainly required some elucidation. But he might well have been lured there in a hurry, and then been pounced on during the journey and brought here. Rogues of the ingenuity of Smith and Seymore would certainly not stick for want of a plan of that kind. A feeling of utter hopelessness came down on me like a black cloud, and I sank into a stupor of dejection.

I must have been asleep, if a restless doze can be called sleep, for I was startled again into wakefulness at a sudden creaking of metal. A long slit slowly increasing in the dense wall of darkness, told me the door was being cautiously opened. I sat bolt upright, waiting, the crack as slowly disappeared. The door had again been closed. Still I did not move and said nothing.

There were soft uncertain footsteps on the floor. And then I was conscious of a faint whiff of perfume, a subtle

essence in the air that I couldn't describe; but it was enough to tell me that it wasn't a man who had entered.

My first thought was a joyful one: it was Marget. Marget had come, she had seen me carried here across the yard, she had come to free me! And then the recollection of the events in the library twenty-four hours before swept across my mind, and with it my hopes again slipped away.

"Are you there?"

The voice had a low contralto note, and the words were spoken in a pretty, staccato, foreign way. The voice was pleasant. But it was not Marget. What this visitant with the pretty voice wanted, I could only discover by waiting her good time.

"I'm sorry I can't offer you a seat," I said after a moment or two.

She laughed softly, cutting her laughter short. "But we mustn't make a noise," she whispered. "I'm not supposed to be here."

"Neither am I," I replied. "I thought I'd just pop in here for a rest, the darkness is so restful and jolly."

"Poor boy!" she murmured. Then the beam of an electric torch flickered round and, resting on me, dazzled my eyes. It played up and down from my head to my feet, then was snapped out. "H'm, I thought it was you."

"You have the advantage," I said. "Turn it t'other way now—that's only fair."

She gave an exclamation of pretended horror. "How can you suggest it? I do not dare. You think me now to be attractive, perhaps beautiful. Men always do till they know the truth! I dare not show you the truth. You would no longer be interested."

"I swear I would."

"No, no. You would yawn, you would not even talk to



me. And I have come to talk, just for a little while. . . . I am lonely."

"I'm so sorry. I was lonely too." I bit back a horde of quick questions that came to my lips: but perhaps the answers would come without my asking, if I only waited.

"A cigarette would be pleasant," she murmured after a short pause.

"You'll find my case in my jacket pocket," I invited. "Matches in the other one. My apologies for not handing them. Won't you help yourself?"

"Thank you, I have some." I could hear her moving again. A hand touched my forehead, then a cigarette was put between my lips. "You will smoke?" A match spurted into flame between us.

It was not the match I looked at, while I lit my cigarette and she lit hers, but at her face. It wasn't the face of a mere girl, but was singularly beautiful, with her short black hair, enormous grey eyes and delicate eyebrows, her slightly aquiline nose and softly curved lips; it was a face pale and handsome, a face of immense attraction, a face one would never forget.

"You wretch!" I exclaimed.

"I? What have I done?" Her big eyes looked at me over the match-flame.

"You pretended you weren't pretty," I said boldly. "You're a little liar, you know."

With a little puff of annoyance the match was out. "Oh! I forgot that match—you should not have looked! You should have been gallant and closed your eyes. You swear you will not recognize me if we should meet again?"

"I won't give you away," I laughed, puffing luxuriously in the darkness. "But why do you think we might meet again?"

"I am his secretary, you know. One can never tell."

"Secretary? Phew! I didn't know Smith had one."

"He has large business interests. He is a wonderful man. You would admire him."

"I did till a couple of hours ago. Now I could kill him. Perhaps I will when I get a chance. And that cur Seymore too."

"I know Mr. Seymore, and I do not like him. But Mr. Smith too is sometimes cruel. Dreadfully cruel. I have often thought I would like to leave him, but I have not dared."

"But you must know he's a scoundrel!"

"I am paid well to know nothing. I met him in Budapest—I am Hungarian—and I was starving. But he found I knew languages, and he gave me food and money, and if I left him what would I do?" Then her voice dropped to a whisper. "But I would leave him—if I could!"

"I am so very sorry for you," I began, but she gave a laugh.

"Oh, life is a hard thing, and I must not mourn. No; it is you I am sorry for. Why are you here? I have no right to ask, but I would like to help you if I can."

"There's only one way you can help me," I replied quickly. "There's a knife in my——"

"I dare not, I dare not," she ejaculated. "No, it is in another way I might help you, if you would only tell me about yourself. You are Mr. Drysdale of Brackenbridge Hall, are you not?"

"How did you know?"

"I knew you were to come to dine, and besides I have seen you before—oh, once or twice, when you did not see me."

"I'll tell you when I saw you before," I said. "I saw you last night in the Hall library."

"Yes," she admitted slowly. "I was there. But for what purpose I do not know. Please, please, tell me what

the trouble is—what are you all fighting for? Why are you here like this?”

“I wish to Heaven I knew!”

She gave a little incredulous gasp. “But do you not know? You risk everything—your life—for something you do not know? Oh, you British!”

“That’s about the size of it,” I conceded.

“But if there is something about you or your house so important, how do you not know?”

“Why should I? I have only been in the place a week or two.”

“Yes, yes——” She stopped, and there was silence for a minute.

“What’s up?” I inquired.

“Hist!” she whispered. “I thought I heard something. I must go quickly—I must not be found here. We must put out the cigarettes.” There was but an inch of mine left, and she flung it on the floor beside her own and trampled out the glowing tips.

Then I felt two hands steal round my neck, and a soft mouth touched mine for an instant. “Remember,” whispered her voice in my ear, “I am your friend, and I want to help you.”

Again the long slit widening and receding in the darkness told me that the door was being opened and shut, but she did it so quietly that I heard but the gentlest creak.

Her ears had been quicker than mine, for heavy footsteps were growing louder in the yard. They were followed by others, till there must have been three or four men crossing on the cobblestones. They passed close to the place where I was imprisoned, and I could hear heavy doors being clanged open.

There followed a great noise of activity. Heavy things were being moved about. This sound of strenuous movement went on and on, till I think two hours must have

passed. But still no notice was taken of me. It grew more and more apparent that I was there for a night. Then I heard the sound of a heavy motor engine being started up.

“What the blazes are they up to now?” I asked myself.

A voice called out a good-bye; there was the coarse grinding of gears; and then I distinguished the clanking sounds as if a motor lorry had started off. Perhaps twenty minutes later another lorry followed. Then the door of my shed was flung quickly back. Two great burly men unlashd my hands from the pillar and retied them together, doing the same with my legs; and I was heaved bodily over a broad back and carried into the open air. The gaping end of a huge covered van swam into view. I was lifted up and stowed away among tightly packed wooden crates. The lorry started with a jerk, and the farm-yard of Black Edge, with its great barns and the two lighted windows in Smith’s sitting-room, faded into the darkness.

## CHAPTER XXI

### WHAT I FIND ON BOARD SHIP

**I**T was a long jolting journey over rough roads. We must have travelled for a couple of hours before we drew up. I heard the slam of a gate, and we moved on again. We now seemed to go with difficulty, the engine roaring and panting, as if the surface underfoot were bad. Then another stoppage, and again someone scrambled down from the driving seat. The sound of another opening gate penetrated to my ears. As we moved off I heard the brakes creaking ; my feet tilted upwards ; and the crates on which I lay slid forward as the lorry went down a steep incline.

When we drew to a stop the canvas curtain was furled back, and I was hauled out by my heels like a bundle of firewood, and dumped upon the ground.

The sea ! At once I felt the tang of it in my nostrils. The long, low wash of waves came to my ears in corroboration. Straining, I lifted my head and found I was on a grassy bank at the side of a rough track. The lights of the lorry had been extinguished. Indeed in that little bay, shut in by cliffs, there were no lights of any kind or signs of any activity. But I saw at the water's edge, twenty yards away, a group of men confabbing together. And then beyond them my eye caught for the first time the glinting light of some vessel out at sea. I watched the light steadfastly. It never moved. The ship must have been riding at anchor. But was it a ship, I asked myself ? I gazed at it till my eyes filled with the strain. It was either a ship at anchor, or the light on some island off the

coast. I dropped my head and watched it with reference to a jutting piece of rock by my side. It swayed slightly, and moved back again. A ship it was, swinging gently in the tide.

What riveted my attention on it chiefly was the fact that the group at the water's edge were perpetually pointing to it. Indeed, it seemed to be the centre of their talk. Levering myself up with my shoulder I managed to get into a position half-sitting, half-lying. And now I saw that there was a flat and roughly-levelled stretch of ground, which made a sort of rude wharf, and against the rocks at the edge there thudded gently a low flat-looking craft which might have been a coal-barge, or possibly a large fishing smack. It was too dark to distinguish it with any clearness ; but putting two and two together I concluded I would presently be trundled into that boat, together with the crates I had lain on, and be shipped out to that vessel at the mouth of the bay.

Truly, a joyous outlook !

The accuracy of my guess was confirmed as snatches of talk floated back to me. I gathered, also, that there was some contention among them about their immediate course of action, the words " Skipper late " cropping up every now and then. I understood from chance-caught phrases that the skipper had been away getting provisions somewhere, and had not yet turned up. One voice louder than the others seemed to predominate, and then they started to unload the lorry. The other two lorries that had started before us were nowhere to be seen. They must have already emptied, and had gone on their road. I quickly dropped again on my back and kept still, as two men detached themselves from the rest and came over to the spot where I lay.

" Here," said one of them, pointing down at me, and they lifted me with ease and jogged me up the cart-track.



Where was I being taken now? This question did not worry me long, because the jolting movement was making the cords cut into my wrists and legs, and the immediate physical suffering, and how to ease it, was all I could think of for the next few painful minutes.

"I'll walk if you loose my feet," I groaned.

"You'll shut up," growled the fellow who held my feet.

They lurched into a hole at the roadside, and I called out with agony. Then I was dragged a few yards up a steep path, and I saw we were on a little flat space in front of a tiny whitewashed fisherman's cottage.

Without hesitating they advanced to the door. One of them kicked it open with his foot, and we entered. I was bumped round a table, and another door was pushed back. I had been lifted in feet first, and the man who held my legs was clearing a space on the floor. Unceremoniously I was dropped, and a lock grated home.

For a minute I could do nothing but lie and gasp with relief. The agony of that short journey had been unspeakable. When I was able to twist round and look about me, I saw there was a small window high in the wall, and a little light struck on the other side of the tiny room. As my eyes grew more accustomed to the darkness, I saw that the whitewashed walls were thick with what looked vaguely like posts and nets and other such things. Apparently I had been locked in a sort of storeroom, the other room through which we had entered being the living-room of the cottage.

"Hullo!" I called out softly. "Is anyone there?" There was no reply. And that struck me as queer. For an idea had been taking shape in my mind that I was not the only one who had been carried to the coast in these lorries. Mr. Shaw, their other prisoner, was not far off, or my reasoning powers were much at fault. For they clearly wanted Shaw out of their way as much as they

wanted me, and I had heard him being taken from a shed at Black Edge not long before I was bundled out myself.

Then, if Shaw was not in this fisherman's cottage, where was he? Probably, I decided, he had already been taken out to the ship in the bay. It looked as if they didn't want us to meet, or, indeed, the one to know that the other was a prisoner.

My eyes by this time were able dimly to distinguish objects opposite the little window. My first impression had been correct; there were piles of nets and posts; and I wriggled into a sitting position as I imagined I saw a bundle of tools thrown beside them, spades and the like. Tools—there was a possible way of salvation!

I got a leg below me and twisted and screwed till I was on my knees. In this position the cords cut cruelly, but I shut my teeth hard. On the chance of there being a sharp edge among those tools, lay my only remaining hope of liberty. The floor was lumbered with pots, rolls of line, and other junk unknown to me. Inch by inch I wriggled among it, and got my face close to the jumble of tools. Then I moved round to let the faint light strike them. There was the handle of a spade against the whitewash of the wall, but for the rest I could make out nothing. Squirming with agony I tried another plan. I turned and lay against them, so that my numbed fingers could perhaps tell by the feel if there was a sharp edge I could use upon my bonds.

An inch at a time, I moved, making an unholy clatter among the pots with my helpless legs which felt like one cold inanimate lump of stone. Joy! My fingers, stretching and twisting, hit upon the crisp rigidity of cold steel. I shuffled another inch, and my head spun with sudden hope; it was an axe-head. The edge was blunt and jagged like a saw, but it was a thousand times better than

nothing. I tugged round the blade till the other tools gave it some support. Then I slipped my wrists over it and worked.

I worked ! I cannot relate how I worked. The next half-hour saw me put forth one of the most intense physical efforts I have ever made. It was an effort I was woefully unfitted for. My head was sick and bursting ; I ached in every limb ; my wrists and ankles felt as if they were cut and bleeding with my bonds ; but there was a great hope in me, and it was on that hope I fed. Never will I laugh again at the man who says that in his time of extremity an hour was like a lifetime. That half-hour when, numb with cramp, I lay in a heap and rubbed the cords on my wrists back and forwards, back and forwards, over a blunt half-inch of axe-blade, was as if all my life's agony had been concentrated in a cup, and was being administered to me now in one slow dreadful draught. Then I felt one cord go. I could have cried out with joy, but there were others still holding, and the knots seemed to be endless. Feverishly I worked, till I felt the bonds round one hand were slackening.

I had won through ! My hand slipped out of its multiple noose, but the other still was firm, and the cords round my body were as tight as ever. Ten minutes more, five minutes, would do the rest. Then, sick with sudden agony, I rolled over and lay still, my hands behind me. For there were footsteps crunching on the shingle outside the cottage.

By the time the door had been opened, I managed to get my free wrist back again in the noose, and had gathered the severed ends in my hand. With luck, when they carried me out, the difference would pass unnoticed.

But to take me away seemed far from their intention at the moment. The lock of the storeroom was turned. A

candle stuck on a bottle was pushed into the room followed by a heavily bearded face ; there was a grunt, and I was alone again in the darkness.

The room next door seemed suddenly full of voices. Half a dozen men at least must have entered. Someone was serving out drink, for I caught the clink of glasses ; and there were hoarse exclamations of toasts being drunk. Soon the talk settled into a gruff mutter that went on endlessly. It seemed they were waiting till someone should come : doubtless they had determined to be as comfortable as possible till the skipper turned up with the provisions I had heard them talking about on the beach.

How soon, that was the question, how soon would he come ? If there were a clear twenty minutes I would take the risk of freeing myself of my bonds and making a dash for it. But if they came for me in the middle of my efforts, I was done for ; they would see that no such chance came to me again. Minutes passed, minutes of miserable suspense. I could stand it no longer. I jerked myself off my back, slipped loose my free hand and tore the other wrist with the fierce vigour of desperation. It was my last throw of the dice, my last bid for escape. The cords came away at last, and I tackled those that held my arms, listening the while for the slightest pause in the growling hum of talk through the wall. And then I tugged at my legs and ankles, fearful all the time lest I should knock over one of the things that lay thick around me on the floor. In the end I stood up—free, yet not free, for there was one last ditch to cross.

A moment's thought showed how impractical an attempted rush through the next room would be. There remained the little window in the wall. It was high above me. I felt round, and came on a wooden box. Gingerly I got up on it. Standing on tiptoe my fingers barely touched the sill. It was now or never ; delay increased

the danger an hundredfold ; and I gave a little jump for the window-ledge and pulled myself up by my hands.

The window looked out on a black steep hillside. It was darker now ; the patch of night-sky, which I saw above the horizon, was of a duller grey than when I had been brought indoors. Holding myself precariously on one hand and elbow, I felt for the catch of the window. It was fastened tight with wire ; this I bent till the catch slipped off. Then softly I pushed the window outwards. It swung back with a gentle grating noise.

Speed was now my main object, speed and silence. I got my elbows over and heaved myself through the opening. There was no room to spare, and certainly no room to turn round. So I went out that window head first like a cat and dropped on my hands, rolling like a tossed-down bundle on the coarse grass and sand. At any other time the fall would have rattled me, and I should have wondered how many muscles were sprained ; but freedom was like a heady wine ; and I was on my feet and up that sloping bank as lithe as a weasel.

The boat, when I pushed it out, took gently to the water without a jar, and I sculled softly away from the beach. When the light from the cottage window stood low over the water, I knew it was well out from the shore, and I lay back over the oars and pushed her along with all my power. With quick glances over my shoulder, I made direction for the riding light and the ship at anchor ; and it was only when I pulled up half-way for a short breather, that I realized in cold blood what I had undertaken. " I'm a quixotic ass ! " I told myself, and yet there was an element in my quixotism that had a deeper pull than I cared at first to admit.

The truth is that when I had reached the top of the bank, and was about to plunge inland to some place of



safety, I remembered about Shaw. The light of the vessel in the bay was winking lazily with its little yellow eye. Shaw! He was out there; and I was free. Shaw, the man I had wrongly suspected of complicity with these rogues. And, more, the father of the girl who meant everything to me. "I'll have a jolly good stab at it," I muttered, and the next I knew I was feeling my way swiftly downwards to the beach. A couple of minutes later I had come on a small boat drawn up by the side of a shed; I pushed it through the wash of the breakers, and was out on the gently heaving waters of the bay.

I bent again to my oars. The risk, I reflected, was not perhaps as desperate as it looked. The crew of the vessel was ashore in the fisherman's cottage, and as for the look-out man on board, well, either a game of bluff, or something quicker, would allay that difficulty. Besides, in Shaw lay my best chance of learning the truth about the welter of events I was involved in. I told myself I was attempting the rescue for Marget's sake, but there was also the solution of the Brackenbridge troubles as an additional incentive.

The light over my shoulder was stronger now. But it had come down so dark I could make out nothing of the vessel. Soon I was almost upon it, and saw the rigging against the sky and a thick funnel with a clumsy bridge and heavy poop like hunched shoulders behind it. I paddled slowly in. The sea was washing round the vessel's sides, and I had no fear of being heard in that loud muttering of the waters. If the sea looking down at it from the deck were as dark as the vessel seemed to my eyes, not the keenest look-out man would spot me. I shipped my oars and, one hand against the vessel's side, I worked my way slowly along, on the alert for some means of entrance. My hand struck a metal bar, which turned out to be the



rung of an iron ladder. That was better than I hoped. I tied to this ladder the rope in the bow of the dinghy, and climbed upwards.

Cautiously I looked over the gunwale. A lantern hung above me on the mast, but that was the only sign of life. Should I send up a brisk halloo, and bluff the man on watch that I was an accredited messenger come for Shaw? Or should I try sterner measures? I listened for some sound of the man on watch, but could hear nothing save the waves round the hull. I pulled myself up and stepped gingerly on deck.

Nothing stirred. A heavy iron pin, which my hand encountered on the gunwale, I pulled out and slipped in my pocket. It wasn't much of a weapon in a tussle, but it was better than nothing. There must be somebody on board, I reflected, yet the silence was uncanny. I went aft, picking my way over ropes and around hatchways. A companion-way led downwards. I stepped forward and took a survey. There was a door at the side of it, and one or two portholes bearing on the deck. Then I noticed what I hadn't observed before. Through these portholes there was a dim glimmer of light. I peered through, but could make out nothing. Tiny curtains were drawn inside.

Then a solution of the stillness occurred to me—here possibly was the man who should be on his watch having a quick cup of coffee over a stove. I had to get a move on of some kind, for to do nothing was to court disaster. So prepared either to bluff like the devil, or make a fight of it, I slowly pushed open the door.

The place I entered was a little saloon, with a door between into a cabin. But the saloon was empty. A lamp, turned low, stood on the table. Was Shaw a trussed-up heap in the cabin? I stepped forward. And suddenly with a clang the door slammed behind me. At the same

moment something hard was stuck against my back, and a sharp voice rang out :

“ Hands up ! ”

I turned with a gasp.

And I looked into the smiling face of George.

## CHAPTER XXII

### THE MAN AT THE HELM

“GOOD lord, it’s Ronny ! ”

George’s hand, with the pointed revolver, dropped to his side, and he gave a shout of laughter.

“By jove, old thing, you did put the wind up me for a minute ! ”

“What about me ! ” I gasped. “Talk of wind up ! But what the deuce does it all mean ? What in heaven’s name are you doing here ? ”

“And what are you doing ? ”

“I came to find Shaw. These two wrong ’uns, Seymore and Smith, collared me, and I was dumped into a fisherman’s cottage ashore. By a bit of luck I got clear and came out here to get Shaw away. He must have been lugged out a couple of hours ago.”

“You’ve drawn blank,” said George. “I’ve been aboard for three hours. Not a soul has shown up except yourself, and I’ve kept a stiff look out. As a matter of fact, I came in here to see if this fellow has come round yet.” He stooped down and pulled the burly body of a seaman from below the broad seat-boards. He was tied up and helpless, and there was a gag in his mouth.

“Sorry, old fellow,” said George, stooping down. “That was a nasty swipe you got. Feeling better now ? ”

The seaman glared viciously. George pulled a flask from his pocket, and untied the handkerchief that held the gag in place. A string of foreign oaths flowed from his mouth like a spring tide.

"Have a gargle of this," said George, holding the flask to his lips. "You'll feel better." The man drank greedily. George slipped back the gag and whipped round the handkerchief. "I'm expecting company in a little while," he remarked, "and it wouldn't do for you to be singing a hymn when they come aboard—they might think it was a missionary ship and back-water."

Then he turned to me.

"Come outside, Ronny. We've been long enough in here. We're running a nice little risk of being knocked over the head, which would happen in a twinkling if the crew got aboard without our spotting 'em. Up on the bridge with you! We can talk there, and for heaven's sake keep your eyes skinned. This darkness is the very blazes."

"You haven't told me what you're doing here," I ejaculated; "when did you come from London?"

"I got to Berwick yesterday morning. But on duty my friend. On duty. You remember my Home Office pal I spoke of in Edinburgh? He's been messing about for some weeks on a special mission, and he got me roped in for it as well. That's why I had to go to London. As soon as the fellow's report came in, I was bundled north on the same job."

"What job?"

"For over a year," said George, "there's been a leakage into Germany from this country of aeroplane parts, and machine-gun parts, and lord knows what else of the same sort. A regular trade of it! Yes, you may well gasp. They've suspected the stuff has been going from Leith camouflaged. I was to go and join my pal in Edinburgh. But in the train I began to put two and two together. One rather important fact occurred to me, namely, that the coast guard had been abolished for about a year. And, by jove, Ronny, I hopped out at Berwick instead of going

on to Edinburgh, and chartered a motor launch. At least, I tried to. Shut up for a second, and I'll tell you. Yes ; this was yesterday morning. There was only one motor launch in the place, and that belonged to a young lunatic called Jerry Millerton. The natives think him half-baked—if he isn't trying to kill himself in his motor car, he's trying to drown himself in his motor boat. Jest the man I wanted ! Well, he isn't a man, he's a youth of nineteen. I interrupted him at breakfast, and he swore the launch was at my disposal for a trip to the North Pole, if I liked, only he must come too. Been eating his head off, has Jerry, for a bit of excitement, and, by thunder, he's got it ! We trailed that coast yesterday to Dunbar and back, and I jotted down six likely coves on my map, and decided to watch 'em like a hawk every night. I thought I'd pop through to Brackenbridge last night and tell you about it, and Jerry took me in his car. We got there about ten, and on the sitting-room table in the cottage there was a note for Jessie saying you'd left for London after all last night. I was flummoxed. I had told you on the 'phone the night before to stay where you were. Then I saw the letter wasn't in your handwriting at all—it was a forgery, I was dead certain of it. The idea was obviously to keep anyone from worrying at your absence. Dirty work, in short ! I had a confab with Marget, who was nearly off her chump about her father. It was pretty plain to me that you were both in Seymore's hands, and that he was one of the blighters at the back of this aeroplane and machine-gun business. I couldn't for the life of me think what that man's game has been, till suddenly all the facts seemed to fit in. There was only one way to tackle it, and that was at the roots. I decided to go right back to Berwick and get on patrol in Jerry's motor boat.

“ Which I did. But do you think that Shaw girl would stay at home ? Nary a bit of it. And she stuck to her

point. If I was going to look for her guv'nor and Ronny, she was coming too. And come she did. She thinks Jerry the most wonderful cove in the world—next to you."

"You mean she's here?" I cried. "Marget?"

"That's exactly what I do mean," said George, "and if I mistake not, I think they're disobeying orders and coming on board this very minute. That you, Jerry?" he called out.

"Aye," said a Scotch voice. "I'm fed up. I'm coming beside you, and the lassie's comin' as well."

"Then the lassie's mad, and you too," replied George, "and serve you right if you're both filled with lead. Up you come."

And in a few moments I was holding Marget's hands, and trying to distinguish her features in the darkness.

"Ronny, Ronny, I'm so glad you're safe! I've had such a time. But where's Dad? Don't you know anything about Dad?"

"He was at Black Edge the last I heard of him—I could hear his voice, that was all."

"Don't you worry, my girl," put in George. "The old boy's all right, mark my words. And he'll be quit of that lot sooner than you think. Hullo, Jerry! Shake hands with Ronny, and congratulate him, for he's dodged the blighters without our help."

A small stout youth, hatless, but muffled to the eyes, shook hands vigorously. "This is the life," he vociferated with fervour. "Nothin' like chasin' folk——"

"Shut up, Jerry," said George. "Ronny! Tell me, what was that light just up from the beach?"

"The fisherman's cottage I was locked in. The crew were waiting there for the skipper."

"Well, the light's gone out. That means they'll be here soon. Oh, by the way! Where did you leave your boat when you came on deck?"



"Down by the iron ladder."

"Then get it away from there quick. Take it round to the seaward side of the ship where Jerry's launch is—I don't want them bumping into it and getting a warning of what's in store for 'em." He turned to Jerry. "Jerry, your job's finished. Push off home now as hard as you can. And keep your mouth shut when you get there. Thanking you kindly for the way you slugged that look-out man behind the ear, I wish you good night."

"Oo——" groaned Jerry, with much lamentation.

"No more of it," snapped George. "Obey my orders. I'll look you up as soon as I can. You've been a sport. I won't forget it. Good night."

And muttering something about there being no justice in the world, Jerry clumped sadly from the bridge.

"You go back with him too, Marget, there's going to be heavy weather here in a few minutes."

Marget's voice came sharp and determined. "I stay. I can help you. I won't move an inch, so there!"

"Can you handle a revolver?" said George crisply.

"Try me," said Marget.

"We'll see," chuckled George. "I wouldn't trust Jerry with a gun for worlds—he's been having the time of his young life and is strung up like a fiddlestring. Which reminds me." He ran to the side of the bridge and leant over: "Jerry, if you make a row or show a light before you're round the point and out of sight, I'll flay you alive."

"Right-ho," sang out Jerry's mournful voice, and there was a soft splutter as his engine started.

"Come in here," commanded George, after the launch had moved off. "I've collared all the pistols I could find on board. A couple each, and the rest go to feed the fishes. That's the ticket. And for God's sake don't fire unless I do. They shouldn't be long now. Let's get down on deck to be as near 'em as possible."

Shortly after, there was the irregular thudding of some small asthmatic engine.

"They're sooner than I thought," whispered George.

Presently the engine was shut off, and a high-pitched voice hailed someone by name.

"He's under the cabin seat, old thing," chuckled George softly. "They're drifting in. A couple of secs' more."

The high-pitched voice swore lustily with the vigour and confidence of authority, and ended up with an adjectival demand that an equally adjectival rope be slung them at once.

George vaulted up on the gunwale. The sudden beam of his electric torch flooded the stern of the lighter ten feet below. The crew was huddled there, a short bearded man standing up with his hand on the tiller.

"The first man that moves is a corpse!" said George quietly. "Go over the side, anybody, and I fire just the same. Here you at the other end—I see you. Stand fast and catch a rope. Fling him one, Ronny."

A group of brown startled faces peered up at us in the pallid light of the torch.

"Put up your hands, everybody, while the skipper comes aboard. Come along, skipper! Bimble lightly up that ladder. I want you."

The short bearded man stood dead still. There was a tense pause of perhaps a minute; then he let the tiller swing, and clambered deliberately on deck.

"Take this torch, Ronny, and keep our friends down there covered. Blaze away if anybody moves an eye. Now, skipper. It's finished. Briefly, the game's up."

"What the devil——" began the man doggedly.

"Hush," said George. "There are ladies present."

"Ladies?" the skipper swung round, and with the tail of my eye I could see him gazing at Marget, who was

leaning over the gunwale by my side, her two revolvers in a business-like poise.

"Yes, and she's worth a dozen men, as you'll perhaps find if you try any monkey tricks. You're a little more than two to one, skipper, but we've got the guns and we mean business."

"What is it you want?" demanded the skipper in a high, sibilant voice. "We take aboard provisions, that is all——"

"I know all about you," snapped George abruptly. "I want no more guff. Order your men to take aboard the cargo from that lighter, and then we steam for Leith, or by thunder, I'll bore a hole in you where you stand!"

There was a pause behind me on that deck, a pause in which the skipper seemed to be weighing matters up. Then he gave a grunt, leant over the side, and spoke in a curious language like Dutch.

"English please," rapped out George. "I want no hanky-panky."

"They do not understand——" declared the skipper shrilly.

"It's a lie," I interposed. "I heard some of them talking in English on the beach—they're not all foreigners."

"Get the stuff aboard, you ——" snarled the skipper.

"That's the spirit," said George. "And tell 'em to look slippy. The first man that slacks off I'll make him do the gun-dance on the deck. Not know the gun-dance, skipper? I fire at the deck, and you've got to jump like a deer or get little holes bored in your ankles. Toppin' fun it is, toppin'! And in case you play the same game on me, you might empty your pockets, skipper. Ah, thank you. I'll look after this little fellow. A nasty bark he's got by the feel of him! Now get a move on!"

Dawn was breaking by the time the last cases were

hoisted aboard. The men went about their work in sullen silence, the three of us standing over them, watchful for the slightest sign of a move to gain the upper hand.

"Now get under way," commanded George. "You take the lighter in tow, and haul the dinghy aboard it. You'd better scull the dinghy round, Ronny. It might be too great a temptation for somebody to do a bolt."

We shipped anchor, and the three of us held the bridge beside the skipper. From this point one could see nearly every part of the deck, and it was the best coign of vantage on the ship. It was a curious sensation to feel that vessel begin to move, to feel the handrail throb, and hear the seas break round the bows, and to know that you were at least in part control of this floating barracks of iron and rusty paint.

"Lock the crew in their quarters, skipper," said George. "You want a couple in the engine-room, and a man at the wheel. Change 'em after a four hours' whack if you like, but the rest must be under lock and key."

"Come in here," suggested George to Marget and me; "it's like Greenland out there." He led the way into a little raised deck-house which stood behind the bridge on the same level. There were windows on three sides, and part of it was partitioned off as the captain's cabin.

"He's a tough nut, that skipper," smiled George. "But I should say he's loyal to his boss. More than I can say about the crew! They look like a gang of jailbirds. Well, they've hit the rocks this trip. Now look here, Marget," he turned to the girl, "I insist on you lying down and having forty winks. You're dog-tired, and I should say that bunk in there looks comfortable."

Marget did as she was bidden for once, and George shut the door of the little cabin.

"Talk of pluck, Ronny!" exclaimed George. "That

girl's got it if anybody has ! She'd keep on till she dropped. Ah, here's the skipper. . . ."

The little man clambered on the bridge and put his head into the deck-house.

"Key of fo'c'sle," he grunted.

"Thanks," drawled George, looking at him shrewdly. "Is the place locked ?"

The skipper gave him a black look. "It is locked. I have said so."

George smiled quizzically. "If that's a lie, skipper, I lock you with the others myself and damn well navigate this ship to Leith without you—yes, though I bang into the Bass Rock. Ronny, nip down with this key and see if the forecastle door's locked. It's two or three steps down a companion-way in the bows."

I returned and put the key down on the table. "Locked it is, George. Skipper's correct."

"Skipper," said George, "I apologize. You're a gent, and I thought you were only a scoundrel. You're that as well, of course, but you're a gent all the same."

"Thank you," said the skipper quietly, and closed the glass-partitioned door behind him.

"Ronny," said George, as we lit cigarettes, and lay back on the hard seats gazing out on the grey desert of waters ; the white caps were lashing, and a long black ridge of land was becoming visible in the gathering light of early morning. "Ronny, you didn't tell me how those rascals collared you. I'm curious to know how it happened."

I related briefly how I had followed Seymore to Black Edge, my experience there with the grey dog, Smith's call next day and his pleasant invitation, the wire, and my fortunate 'phone call, my night in the Hall, and the intruders, and lastly my most excellent dinner with Smith at Black Edge, and its sudden ending.

“ It was when I swore I was going to stick it to the end that Smith shoved a revolver in my face. He said I’d had three broad hints to clear out, and now he was going to do it for me.”

“ Ah ! ” cried George. “ That knifing business and the popping off at you at the pool was simply to scare you !—and perhaps that business in the library with the air-gun was ditto ! We know the game they’re up to with this ship, and we know that Black Edge is simply a nice lonely dump for the stuff till the ship’s ready to take it off. But I’m hanged if I can see why they want you out of the way. Of course they were afraid you might discover the truth about Black Edge. But I feel there’s another reason. For instance, why all that bother about a leather case ? ”

“ And why have they collared Shaw ? ” I put in.

“ I can’t understand what’s happened to Shaw,” said George, lowering his voice again. “ Why wasn’t he carted out here with you ? There’s no doubt, I suppose, that you heard him last night at Black Edge ? ”

“ No doubt at all. I heard him as plain as I hear you. By the sounds I heard, he was being shoved across the yard, and he was putting up a stout resistance and telling ’em what he thought of ’em. I always wondered how much he had to do with Seymore, but when I heard his voice last night, swearing as much as his profession would allow him, I washed out my idea of his being hand-in-glove with the Smith gang.”

“ Then he’s still at Black Edge for some reason known only to Smith and Seymore. Smith—Smith—what sort of fellow is Smith ? Tall, clean shaven, going grey ? ”

“ Going grey all right, but he’s got a small grey pointed beard as well.”

“ I wonder if it’s the man. Oh, what a scoop, old son, if it is ! My chief says they suspect a man called Geldart



to be at the bottom of this affair. A terrific chap, this Geldart ; was a pal of Roger Casement. Did spy work for Germany during the war. Mixes with the best people. Gambles like a millionaire at Monte Carlo. A frightful ' blood.' Well, we'll find out sooner than friend Smith thinks ! ”

“ What are you going to do now ? ”

“ As soon as we get into Leith, we hand this packet over and I get in touch with my Home Office pal. We go right to Black Edge with some plain clothes men and upset the apple cart. You see, Smith and Seymore think this ship is tooling across the North Sea, all good and snug, with you on board a prisoner. Who's to tell him differently ? We've even got down in the fo'c'sle the fisherman who lives in that cottage in the bay, and his old lighter is bumping behind us now. No ; we'll catch friend Smith on the hop all right. And now, my lad, you obey Captain Uncle George and have a bit of a snooze on that locker while I keep watch. You look dead beat.”

“ Nothing of the sort ! ” I protested. “ You've had no rest for two nights. You topple over yourself for a few hours. I'll waken you when we're in the Forth, so that you can do the chin-wagging when we get to harbour.” In the end I persuaded him, and, grudgingly, he lay down, rolling round his shoulders a pea-jacket that hung behind the door. In a couple of minutes he was like a stone, sleeping the sleep of utter exhaustion.

I stepped out on the bridge for a sniff of air. It was now nearly eight o'clock and a bitterly cold morning. The skipper was stamping up and down to keep himself warm.

“ Cold ? ”

He seemed startled at my question. That the physical state of one bound for prison should even occur to his jailers appeared to amaze him. He nodded, then gave a friendly grin.

"You can come into the deck-house, skipper. After all, it's your own quarters," I laughed. He thanked me quite courteously, and we entered. "You can have forty winks on that locker if you like." I indicated the one opposite to George. As a matter of fact, it was not kindness that prompted me to bring him in beside me. With him right under my nose, I felt safer than when he walked on the bridge outside.

"I thank you," he said again. "It is warmer here. If you are hungry you will find food in there." He pointed to a little cupboard on the wall. I swung it back and brought out a loaf and a pot of marmalade. It seemed churlish to have food alone, and I asked him if he would care to join me.

"I'm as hungry as a whale," I declared. "You'd better get this spirit stove going, skipper. I'm going to make coffee for us."

"Hot water from engine-room—that will be quicker," he suggested.

"Right," I said. "Send down the steersman, and take his place. Tell him if he tries to jump for it and swim, I'll pot him with my gun as sure as eggs."

But the chill miles of water that separated us from the coast were not sufficiently tempting, for the man returned, and I made the coffee, the skipper and I sharing it between us. George gave only a grunt when I tapped him on the shoulder: he needed sleep more than coffee.

It was during that novel breakfast that the skipper, after a little gentle questioning, told me his own story. As he delivered this stumbling recitation I observed that his nerve had completely gone. He shook, not from the cold, but from sheer prostration, though he had concealed it well from the crew. He had had a decent upbringing, it appeared, and had only gone into this game to save enough to buy a little coasting vessel for himself. He had a wife

and kids in Hamburg, and the man curled up with grief when he spoke of them.

"You're trying to play on my feelings, my lad, with this sob-story," I said to myself, and I wondered what was at the back of it, or what sort of proposition he was about to make. Then I noticed that his mind was wandering, and his voice kept trailing off absently.

"I've told you you could snooze on that locker," I said, but he was asleep as I spoke, his head on his arms, lying over the table. I heaved him round on the locker, and put my revolver on the table. "Now, Mr. Skipper," I muttered grinning, "if there's going to be any monkey tricks, I'm—I'm——"

I stood up and looked round. The glass windows of the deck-house were spinning queerly. I was giving at the knees ; and my back against the wall, I felt myself sinking.

"George !" I gasped. "George . . ." I stretched out my hand to shake him, but only sank lower against the wall, my arm stretched out impotent. A white face was pressed against the glass, two pale blue eyes bored into my brain. It was the helmsman. The last I remember before sinking into unconsciousness was the door opening and a great brown fist closing over my revolver on the table.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### I SEE THE BEAUTIFUL LADY AGAIN

THE cabin was dark and foul, and I must have been half-awake for an hour before I could pull myself together and sit up in the bunk. I thought at first I was in the library at Brackenbridge Hall, and that my head was still bleeding from the blow on the fender. It was the sea's interminable chatter against the tiny porthole that brought me back to hard facts. I had swallowed some poison either in the food or drink, and the skipper had been my fellow-victim. The water heated in the engine-room!—the water I had made the coffee with. And the skipper had drunk more than I had. What did it all mean? That the crew should want to bowl me over I understood—but the skipper also! Had there been the seeds of mutiny among them, and had they seized their chance to knock over the skipper along with their captors? The cabin I was in was but a bunk, with floor space enough for a man to dress, and the door, as I expected, was locked. Through the porthole I saw that dusk was falling: I must have slept nearly twelve hours! Well, another twelve would surely see us at our destination. They had left my cigarette case, but my matches were gone. However, I found some loose in the bottom of a pocket, and lay back on my bunk to smoke and compose myself. It was accursed luck; we had been within an ace of success; and that was that. For myself I was past caring. But when I thought of Marget, I sat upright in a chilling surge of fear.

A little later on, I heard the bolts in the door being shot

back, and the skipper stood in the doorway smiling down at me.

"So they got you too?" I said. "Look here, skipper, hadn't we better hang together in this business?"

"Hang," said the skipper sneeringly. "Oh, no, we find an easier way for you. But not together—oh, no."

"But you were doped as well. It was that coffee, I know. I'll swear you weren't shamming."

"You fool," said the skipper. "Of course I drink it too. Or you would suspect. Oh, not for nothing I select Pierre for the helm! It was Pierre who say to me to give coffee, and I must drink too. And Pierre, he know what to put in the water. Pierre educated man, Pierre good as any doctor. Oh, you English fool." And the skipper chuckled, with a malicious gleam in his eye. "The boss did not give order to finish you off—not yet. If you still bad, Pierre give you drink to make you better."

"He can keep his drinks," I retorted. "I've had some, and I want no more."

"So," said the skipper impassively.

"What have you done with the girl and George?" I demanded.

"They very well, thank you." He grinned, and jerked his thumb over his shoulder. Across a narrow passage were two doors. "They have good dinner. Oh, yes. The boss not like me to starve his guests. You eat?"

"A cup of tea," I said, for my throat was parched.

"Not Pierre's tea?" said the skipper, laughing lustily. "Oh, yes, the boss give me a prize for this good job." And he slammed the door. His visit had been for the purpose of gloating over me, and over the extra pay he would get for saving the ship. But the tea came down at length—not "Pierre" tea—and I was glad of it.

Indeed, it was all I got that night. Darkness drew down; and through the tiny porthole, which I managed to

open, I watched a lighthouse blinking solemnly. Not far off were the pinpoint lights of some little town. Then a high black foreland shut them off, and we came to anchor.

There was a thudding of feet on the deck above. A little later, a bump on the hull below my porthole told me that some craft had come up alongside. Then I caught the spluttering of a motor engine. Where had I heard that crude rhythm before, with its misfiring and choking? Of course! It was the old lighter George had made them take in tow. The crew were boarding it; there was some subdued shouting; orders were given, and replies; and the lighter snorted off, leaving the ship as silent as if she were abandoned.

I think I must have gazed for half an hour at a little eye of light, which was suddenly opened above the beach, before the truth dawned on me. We were back in the bay! We had been messing about in the North Sea all day waiting for darkness, and we had run back to the spot on the coast we had started from last night!

Was this journey made merely to dump the lighter back in the cove? It seemed unlikely; for, judging by the silence, broken only by one pair of feet walking the deck, the crew had gone ashore in her, and there must be some purpose in that. I finished my last cigarette kneeling on my bunk with eyes glued to the porthole. When the lighter snorted back after an hour or two, and a steam-winch started to run, I knew at once the explanation: we had come back for more cargo. And when I came to think it over, the thing was reasonable enough; a vessel of this size would carry forty or fifty tons in her hold; and three lorries would only carry three tons each. It would take more than one night's work to fill her up. Perhaps we were to mess about for another day or two! The prospect of two more days and nights in that cabin appalled me. This inaction, this suspense, if drawn out much longer,



would become an agony quite unbearable. And I felt I should certainly lose what sanity that still remained to me.

When the stuff was taken on board, and the winch had ceased hissing and clanking, the lighter moved away. The crew was now aboard, and I expected the ship to be getting under way. But instead we lay still in the bay. Why this hiatus? Then there was the hail of a voice, and the noise of rowlocks, and someone came on board from a small boat. But even then we did not start.

Sick by that vigil at the porthole, I lay down on my bunk and listened. I think an hour must have passed, perhaps two hours. And then my cabin door was softly opened. I sat up with a jerk.

"Keep quiet!" said a voice in a low whisper. "Is that Mr. Drysdale?"

"Yes. Who is there?"

"It is I—Thérèse."

The girl who said she was Smith's secretary closed the door behind her. I put out my hand in the darkness, and she seized it with a nervous clasp.

"I said I perhaps could help you—I can help you now!"

## CHAPTER XXIV

### BLACK EDGE ONCE MORE

I DID not answer for a moment ; I knew the calibre of the people I was dealing with. Was this some last bitter trick to complete my undoing ? I gave a little laugh ; “ complete ” my undoing, forsooth ! Was it not already complete ?

“ You laugh,” said the girl bitterly. “ You are in despair. I too laugh, for I also despair ! ” I felt her hands trembling, and she seemed to suppress a sob.

“ I don’t understand.” Of a sudden I saw that the girl was in earnest. “ You mean you’ve been shoved on board this ship too—a prisoner ? ”

“ Worse than that,” replied the girl. “ It is the end for me. But I can still help you. I will pay him back ! ”

“ You mean Smith’s given you the sack ?—perhaps I should have said—what’s the name—Geldart ? ”

“ Then you know ? ” exclaimed the girl in low tones. “ You know ? ”

“ Yes ; perhaps more than he thinks.”

“ Then he was right—they are on his track. Mr. Drysdale, he is a fiend, that Geldart. No devil could be more cruel. He had suspected that his trade here would be discovered. He was going to—what you say ?—‘ cut it out.’ And more, his money was running done. It is these Huns, they have not been paying him for six months, though they promise each time. Oh, they are good at promises. But he must have money, much money ; Geldart cannot live without money. This is the last cargo they carry. Geldart say to me ‘ You go on the ship, my

dear. Tell Van Beisen—that is the captain—to wait for me. There are things I must do here. If I do not come by four o'clock, you must sail without me ! ' He tell me to go to a hotel in Berlin and wait for him. So I have come, and four o'clock is past, but there is no Geldart."

" Geldart's coming on board too ? "

" He is not coming," said the girl with a burst of passion. " He did not mean to come. But he want me out of the way. Stay in Berlin till he come ! Faugh ! It is the end. He has finished with me. He throw me off like an old glove ! That is the man Geldart. My money will soon be done, and what is there for me in Berlin ? He is a devil, though he has a smile so pleasant. I tell you all, monsieur, because I hate him for his treachery. I tell you this also : he trusts no one. Not even Seymore. He has spied on Seymore, his own friend—he has made me spy on Seymore. I hate them all. You are the only one who has spoken to me like a friend, and I want to help you."

" But how can you help me ? " I gripped her shoulders in my eagerness.

" Listen ! Geldart give me orders to tell Van Beisen. You and your friends will be released in a week. Not sooner, for he must get away. By now he is far on the road—by to-morrow he will be in France. But he go a rich man ! He take your money, monsieur."

" My money ? But I've got no money," I cried.

" Not now maybe. But yesterday you were rich. The old man Drysdale was a friend of Geldart—it was he who gave him Black Edge for the trade."

" The old laird ! " I gasped. " You mean he was hand-glove with Geldart ? Why——"

" It is so. He was a good man, the laird, but money—that was his God, and he was poor. Geldart tempt him. He had known Geldart a little, many years ago. And he went shares with his old friend. Oh, yes, the laird regret

it later, but too late. Their first enterprise was in the Balkans, and the payment was in precious stones because there was no money. Geldart's share was soon gone, and Seymore's. But the old man kept his stones. Oh, yes, they were hidden from Geldart and Seymore, because they wanted money. They threatened to kill the old man in the end if he did not disclose the stones. And then he died, but the stones were still hidden in the Hall."

"The leather case!" I cried. "A leather case was stolen. There were jewels in it?"

"You are wrong, monsieur. I saw the case in Geldart's hands with the little iron box broken open. There was only a letter addressed to Mr. Shaw, the clergyman. He was the old man's friend, yet he never knew the truth about Black Edge, though perhaps he suspect. But this letter to Mr. Shaw—I have read it, monsieur! It did not say where the stones were hidden, but it said there was a little gift for his girl in a place he knew. Shaw knew! And Geldart had Shaw in his power at Black Edge before many hours."

"And Geldart has got them now?"

"He has got them now. Shaw would not speak—he swore he knew nothing of the stones. To-night Geldart was to torture him till he spoke. Oh, yes, he has got them now and is gone!"

"And Seymore?"

"He went yesterday. Geldart told him the game was up, but he did not tell him he would torture Shaw. Geldart suspected Seymore had been trying to get the stones himself and fly with them—he had been watching Seymore like a hawk, and you should have seen him laugh when Seymore had gone! 'We shall share them together, you and I,' Geldart said to me. But he is tricking me as he tricked Seymore. I would have told you all I knew in that barn at Black Edge, monsieur, but I was loyal, and what

could you expect ? But now—now I hate him ! This is my revenge—I will set you free.”

Her arms suddenly went round my neck. “ You are different from these—brutes ! ” she said in a whisper.

“ Look here,” I managed to jerk out. “ You must write me afterwards. I won’t have you starving—let me send you money till you find employment.”

“ You are kind—kind,” she murmured. She was so close that her wet eyes were on my chest.

“ I will write you. Come quickly now.” We stepped into the dark passage. “ Here is a door in the side of the ship, you go down by a ladder. Below is the little boat I came in. The big barge has been sunk, and that too was to be sunk before we set sail. Good-bye, good-bye, you have only a few minutes now. Do not forget me ! ” Her lips were quickly pressed to my cheek ; before I could say a word of thanks, she was running up the companion-way.

I wasted not a moment in snapping back the bolts from the doors opposite. Marget and George were beside me, awaiting my bidding. The bulkhead swung back, and we dropped into the dinghy at the foot of the ladder. The night was pitch black, and I sculled quietly away from the ship. Out of earshot, I lay back and pulled for my life. The absence of the dinghy was bound to be discovered in a matter of minutes, since they were on the point of setting sail, and it behoved us to put as much distance between us as possible in case of pursuit. We tore up on the beach so hard that we stepped ashore dryfoot. The place was deserted ; there was no sign of the old lighter, nor the sound of a human being. We crossed the cart-track and made up the hillside. The fisherman’s cottage, which we passed on our right, was in darkness. Somehow after the feverish activities I had seen there the night before, there

was a strange feeling of desolation in the air. As the girl Thérèse had said, the last cargo had been shipped.

A fine drizzling rain caught us when we reached the high road, a mile or two back from the coast. We were bareheaded, and thinly clad, and for my part I was famished with hunger. Notwithstanding, we dropped on the roadside and panted like dogs.

"You're a genius, Ronny!" gasped George. "How in heaven's name did you manage it."

"I didn't. It was a dashed pretty girl——"

"A what?" demanded Marget.

"Dashed pretty girl, madam. Dashed pretty. She insisted on kissing me, and I let her. That's what did the trick. She was lonely and sad, and I spoke soft words."

"Huh!" said Marget.

"Good lord!" said George. "Go on."

I told them briefly what had happened, and what the girl Thérèse had related to me. But instead of mentioning Geldart's intention to wring what he wanted out of Mr. Shaw by torture, I saved Marget's feelings by a tactful omission.

"So it was Geldart after all!" cried George excitedly when I had finished. "And he's gone! What a scoop it would have been to collar him. Man, I had set my heart on it! You've no idea where he's bound for, by any chance?"

"The girl didn't know. All she knew was that he was doing a bolt with the old laird's boodle. She suggested France."

"I'll get the ports watched," said George quickly. "We may nab him yet. A 'phone, a 'phone, my kingdom for a 'phone! There are two people I want to get on to at once. One is my Home Office man in Edinburgh—he'll get the instructions put through about watching for Geldart and Seymore. The other is Jerry Millerton at Berwick; he'll



pick us up in his car and run us over to Brackenbridge in no time. Marget will be anxious to know about her father."

"Indeed I am. All during the dreadful time in that ship I was desperate about him! Oh, where do you think he will be?"

"Geldart got all he wanted, so you'll probably find your old man at home. There's only one thing to do, and that's to get a move on. Get up, my hearties, we're tired and weary, but it'll be daylight in half an hour!"

We found a farm-house, a mile or two farther on, and went across to it and knocked.

"Do you want some money?" cried George to the head that shoved out from an upper window. "I'll pay you well if——"

"I want ma sleep," retorted the man grimly. "Midge off."

"Will you drive us to Berwick?" was George's point-blank question.

There was a growl of rage.

"A cheery soul this," whispered George. "Well, I say, farmer, have you got a 'phone?"

"I've got a dog," declared the farmer wrathfully. "Midge off."

George sighed. "A hospitable lad. I say, is there a village a few miles south?"

"Twa-three miles," retorted the farmer. "Ye'll find a bobby there," he added meaningly, and slammed down the window.

"I don't care though if there's fifty bobbies, if there's one 'phone! Get a move on, old things, or, as our friend would say, midge off. Time's passing. We won't waste any more of it over these rustic specimens. We'll knock up the local inn people, and say we've had a motor smash; that'll allay their curiosity. Though Marget here doubtless

looks charming, I'm sure old Ronny and I are apparitions. Tired, Marget? Take my arm."

"Thanks," said Marget. "I will. You'll notice Ronny doesn't offer anything—his head's too full of the pretty secretaries he's been kissing! Secretary? Huh! I've another name for her, the baggage; I wouldn't trust her an inch!"

"She set me free," I protested.

"You must have kissed her to some tune," said Marget.

It was a very weary-eyed landlord who opened his door to us. George made his flesh creep with horror at the motor accident we had had some miles up the road, and while mine host, twittering with sympathy, flapped off in carpet slippers to produce coffee, George shut the door of the sitting-room and made a dive for the 'phone.

"We'll dig out Jerry first. While he's on the way, I'll get through to my man in Edinburgh."

"No reply," said George into the 'phone after a wait. "But there must be a reply. Ah, I thought so. Yes, I want Mr. Jerry. I know he's in bed. You must hook him out, my good girl. I know he'll use awful language, but say it's his old friend Collier . . . that should fetch him. . . ." There was a pause. "Ah, dear old Jerry. We're waiting for you, Jerry. Bring along the old bus like the wind. The inn at—what's this village?—Cauldburn. Your uncle? Oh, tell him some pals of yours have had a motor smash. . . . What! Says he's coming too? Don't let him? For God's sake don't let him! Say he'll die of rheumatism. What's that? Away back to bed? Good. Yes, Miss Shaw's here too, but you needn't stop to shave on her account. We're waiting. 'Bye. Well, that's that," sighed George. "Now for my Home Office pal."

He drank his coffee with the 'phone at his ear, and a

car had drawn up at the door half an hour later by the time he had got in touch with his man.

Jerry Millerton burst in, his blue eyes popping from his head, his white puffy face quivering like a jelly. "Man, this is grand," he bellowed in his deep voice. He shook George by the hand. "I thought I'd never see you again. Where's the ship?"

"Bunked," said George briefly. "We just got clear by the skin of our teeth."

"I knew it," cried Jerry. "I knew it! Ye were making a mistake sending me back. I'd have seen you through! I'd have stopped the ship! But there'll be no more nonsense of that kind now. I'll see you through this time!" And he produced a great villainous-looking revolver, and waved it in the air.

George pulled a wry face, with a grin showing through the scowl. "Put it away, you lunatic. Here's the land-lord coming. You'll have us all run in. Guns are no good now, I'm afraid. As one of your detective stories would say, Jerry, the birds have flown."

Jerry's face clouded with dismay.

"Come along," cried George. "It's time we were on the road. Brackenbridge, Jerry, as hard as you can pelt. You know the way?"

Jerry knew the way. There were few roads in the Border country he did not know. Marget, leaning forward over the front seat, directed him to the Manse. The old servant received us with surprise and joy.

"I never thought to see ye again!" said Kirsty, after weeping on Marget's shoulder. "The meenister? Nae word from him. Nae word. I sair misdoot there's something far wrang."

"Black Edge," cried George. "Turn the car, Jerry."

We roared back along the turnpike and slipped up the side-road to the hills.

“ Carry on straight ahead ! ” I shouted. “ I’ll tell you when to pull up.”

The gate to Black Edge was open, and Jerry swerved in on two wheels, as I bellowed directions. The gates at the farm-yard also stood wide. We leapt out on the cobblestones, and again I had that strange sensation I had experienced on the beach. That farm-yard, humming two nights ago with energy, was now as silent as a cemetery. Only George’s two-seater stood desolately in a corner where I had left it two evenings before when I had come to dine.

George stepped quickly to the back door. It opened to his touch, and we followed him. The place showed clear traces of a hasty departure. Geldart’s bedroom was in disorder, a pile of ashes in the fire-place showing where he had been destroying papers and letters ; but the two living rooms were undisturbed. “ Very nice too,” said George. “ But where’s the parson ? ”

“ We’ll search the barns,” I suggested. “ That’s where I was cooped up.”

When our feet rang again on the cobblestones, a muffled shout could be heard.

“ That’s Dad ! ” cried Marget, her eyes dancing. “ Where is he ? Quick, Ronny, he’s here, he’s here ! ”

I threw down the crossbar on the doors of the larger barn, and swung them open. From the far end a hoarse voice told us we had found the man we searched for. Jerry’s knife made havoc with the bonds, and the next moment Marget was crying in her father’s arms.

## CHAPTER XXV

### THE LAIRD'S HIDING-PLACE

GELDART kept good whisky. Deep in a basket chair in the sitting-room, a glow came to Mr. Shaw's white cheeks, and colour again flushed his trembling lips, as he drank what I gave him. George and I swallowed a peg as well ; and Jerry insisted on joining us, doubtless because he thought it a dashing thing to drink whisky at nine o'clock in the morning, and in spite of the obvious fact that he hated the stuff. George patted the minister's shoulder.

"That's better," he said. "Now you look more like yourself."

"Thank you, thank you," sighed Mr. Shaw wearily. "I feel much better. But to see us all together again is better medicine still ! I thank Heaven we are safe, and these rogues gone. I tell you, I have been through hell on earth during the last few days. Literally, hell on earth."

"I know," said George sympathetically. "We've all been through Geldart's mill. I want a full account of it later. But there's something I must attend to at once, if these scoundrels are to be laid by the heels before they get clear of the country. Can you tell me, Mr. Shaw, what time Geldart left here ?"

"I heard him go in his car. It was very early this morning. Some time after midnight." And Shaw passed his hand over his eyes. "I'm sorry I can't tell you more exactly. I had almost lost count of time. Yes, it was soon after midnight——"

"Right," said George. "Can you tell me anything that might help us to find his destination? You don't know whether it's Dover——"

Mr. Shaw shook his head. "I only know he's gone."

"All right. Now I must get to Edinburgh at once. I promised the Home Office fellow on the 'phone I would come along as soon as I possibly could. He wanted to come right out to Black Edge himself. But I told him he was more use at Edinburgh, in touch with London headquarters. So I must hurry along, or he'll be getting the wind up. Pop out and turn the car, Jerry."

"Five minutes more, and I'll be with you," declared Mr. Shaw. "In fact I can come now——"

"No need for you to move!" explained George. "Take your own time. My old two-seater is out in the yard there. None of them thought it was worth bagging, wise birds! While Jerry and I scoot up to Edinburgh in his car, the three of you can paddle down to Brackenbridge in the old bus. But don't go till Mr. Shaw feels like moving. Bye-bye, everybody! We'll come right back to the Manse as soon as I've finished my jaw with that fellow."

Marget was kneeling on the floor beside her father's chair, her arm around his neck. "Dad, you must have had a hateful time. I hope these brutes are hanged, for I'm sure they deserve it."

"Too good for them," growled the minister. "Last night that scoundrel Smith threatened he'd use physical methods to force me——"

Marget gave a little cry of horror. "He was going to torture you?"

"It's all right," said her father quickly. "After the mental torture I had been through, the very threat seemed to snap something. I must have fainted away."

"But why—what was the object of it all?" cried Marget. "What did he want?"



"Something," said Mr. Shaw, bringing his fist down on the arm of the chair, "something which he did not get! One hears of the terrors of the third degree. Day and night I have been questioned, and day and night I held out. At times I had to bite my tongue till it bled for fear of speaking. If I had told him what he wanted to know, it was obvious what would happen. Within an hour my dead body would have been down in the Black Edge gorge. Once I had spoken, I was no more use to him; he would cover up his traces, and I should die. So you see, in holding my peace, I was fighting for my life. Every hour I lived in hope that rescue was not far off."

He took another mouthful from his tumbler. I was eager to ply him with questions, but I saw that it was easing his mind to tell us his experiences in his own way.

"I was brought here by force that afternoon," he continued, "and wrote a letter to Marget at the pistol's point. Then Smith started his endless interrogations. At first I couldn't make head or tail of his questions. He kept talking of some precious stones he had given the laird—my dear old friend—to lock away safely for him. I was astounded at his words. I had always thought old Mr. Drysdale and Smith were the merest acquaintances. Then Smith said that the laird had admitted he had them somewhere in the Hall, and refused to return them. Smith declared that, now the old laird was dead, I was the only man who knew their hiding-place. I swore to him before God I had never heard of them—that I knew nothing whatever about any precious stones.

"Smith then showed me a leather case. This was the case originally containing the stones, he said, and he had retrieved it, but inside there was only an envelope addressed to me in the old laird's handwriting. Smith told me to read the letter. It was a brief note from old Mr. Drysdale, intended for me after he was dead and gone. It said that

the little gift he had meant for Marget should be given to her now with his love, as for certain reasons he had not mentioned it in his will."

"For me?" said Marget. "What gift? He was always giving me little gifts."

"At first, my dear, I could make nothing of it. Smith was watching me closely. Then of a sudden I knew what the letter referred to. A trifling incident of some months ago came back to me.

"You see, in the tower of my kirk, Mr. Drysdale, there is a little room called the 'Laird's Room.' A Laird of Brackenbridge—yes, a Drysdale—built the kirk as a gift nearly a century ago, and as a token of gratitude this room has always been set aside as the laird's. We often sat up there smoking in the warm evenings, the two of us, for it was pleasant and cool. One day Mr. Drysdale opened a cupboard in the hall containing old church pewter, and put there a little box. 'A gift for Marget,' he said. 'Leave it there meantime, and we'll give it to her one day.' I had forgotten all about it, till that letter recalled the incident. I sat there, Smith watching me keenly, my head going round like a teetotum.

"Yes, in a flash, many other things became plain that I never could understand. This—*this* was at the bottom of that look of fear I had seen growing daily in the old laird's eyes! Since ever he came back from a few weeks' voyage he went a year ago, I felt there was something between us. Something was worrying him, I felt, and he wanted to tell me, but did not dare. One night he gave me an inkling of his trouble.

"Since his return from abroad, he had been forced by some people he had met on his voyage into an enterprise, which he found out afterwards was discreditable, even criminal. He was bitterly ashamed of it, and wanted to draw back, but his associates wouldn't and were terrorizing

him. I pressed him to speak frankly, so that I might help him, but he did not dare, and he swore me to secrecy about the little that he had told me.

"All this came back to my mind with Smith across the table watching me. I knew instinctively these stones were connected with the enterprise the laird had spoken of, and that Smith was one of these associates he wanted to break with. Smith must have seen by my face that I knew some relevant facts, for his questions were pitiless. Thank God, I had the strength to keep silent!"

Mr. Shaw finished the whisky and soda in his tumbler. "Then that man Seymore appeared; it was evident that he was Smith's lieutenant. For some months this Seymore had been no friend to me. At first, of course, he had made himself pleasant—he even looked like becoming an intimate friend, for he has a way with him—and in a weak moment I had given him money to invest. He told me later it was all lost and more, but he kept smiling and promising to recoup me. He said he was wealthy. Spoke of marrying my little girl. Soon I began to see that he could ruin me with a snap of his fingers! But I kept that bitter pill to myself, and hoped for the best. And now, when he appeared with Smith, I understood the truth about him. I saw why he had got me under his thumb! He knew I was the old laird's best friend, and Seymore wanted to be able to shut my mouth in case I discovered more than was good for them! I think I saw everything clearly, as these two ruthless fiends sat opposite me—everything, that is, except what had been going on here at Black Edge. You perhaps know more about that than I do."

"It's just this," I said briefly. "Smith's real name is Geldart. He's been running cargoes of machine-guns and aeroplane parts to Germany. And the old laird, I am sorry to say, gave him—or was forced to give him—Black Edge as a secret depot."

Mr. Shaw stood slowly up, his eyes dilated.

"Is it possible that my old friend was drawn into——"

I shrugged my shoulders. "I'm sorry. It's true. You've said he bitterly regretted it. Geldart wanted to lay hands on these stones—the laird's own share of some Balkan expedition, perhaps of that very voyage you mentioned a year ago."

Mr. Shaw's head was in his hands.

"My poor old friend! My poor old friend! Two cleverer rogues, I think, have never lived. I am not malicious, but it gives me great satisfaction to think they've had to fly without the booty they wanted to steal. I thank God they are gone, and that my little girl is safe, and you Mr. Drysdale and your London friend as well. And now I think I would like to go home."

When we reached Brackenbridge in George's car, Marget declared that her father must go straight to bed.

But he demurred.

"Not till I have performed my duty, my dear! I will do anything you ask me, after I have placed these stones in Mr. Drysdale's hands."

"They're not mine," I said with a laugh. "The laird put them there for Marget—he meant her to have them."

And I smiled quietly to myself, for I had a little idea that it didn't particularly matter who got them, Marget or I.

In his study, Mr. Shaw opened a drawer in his desk and took out a key. "This is the key of the 'Laird's Room.' The key for the kirk door is out in the hall. And now we're ready."

Brackenbridge church stands back from the road among

trees ; and from the vestibule Mr. Shaw led the way up a narrow corkscrew stair. Pushing open a door, he awaited us on a little landing. The stair continued upwards, but on the left there was a heavy iron grille that filled an archway. Beyond this lay a book-lined room with a large square window of coloured glass.

"He couldn't have found a better hiding-place," said Mr. Shaw, inserting the key. "Nobody ever came into this room except the laird and myself. In fact, this is the only key there is."

The iron grille swung back, and we entered.

"See, there's the old pewter cupboard." Mr. Shaw pointed to a little panel with a keyhole and knob on it, high in the wall. A small key hung innocently on a nail beside it.

"And they thought he had concealed them in the Hall!" I exclaimed. "While all the time they were here, in the most innocent place in the world."

Mr. Shaw nodded, stood on tiptoe, and lifted down from the cupboard a little wooden box, with an inlaid pattern, which looked like an ordinary trinket-case. The minister carefully placed it on the table. The box was not even locked, for the lid opened at his touch.

Marget bent over it and gave a cry of disappointment. The box contained a handful of rough stones.

"Is this all?" she cried. "I expected at least to see something pretty!"

I took a brief look at the stones.

"My dear girl, these are uncut diamonds," I said. "You may be certain they're worth thousands, or Geldart wouldn't have practically risked his life to lay hands on them!"

"You may be certain of it," corroborated the minister.

"You may be *very* certain of it," said a soft voice behind us.

We turned with a gasp. And Geldart himself smiled on us from the open doorway.



## CHAPTER XXVI

### THE LAST HAZARD

“**V**ERY certain of it,” he repeated, chuckling because we were struck dumb.

He gave us not a moment to recover. His right hand was in his side pocket, and the clothes juttèd ominously. He quickly stepped into the room, snapped shut the box on the table, and slipped it into a pocket. Back in the doorway, he bowed and said in the most amiable way possible :

“ I am sorry, friend Drysdale. I liked you. You liked me. We would have got on well together. Unfortunately our interests clashed. But before I go, I must clear up any doubts you may have that the girl Thérèse is not the fool she pretended to be. You see, when I leave a place, I hate false impressions to remain. She told you what she did on my instructions. It was all true, because you already knew too much for mere lies to be convincing. You were also released on my orders.” He smiled and bowed again. “ Not because she was a fool.”

At that I found my voice. “ I never thought she was a fool,” I said steadily. “ If you want to know, I thought her charming. I congratulate you on your—er—secretary.”

“ Thank you. I will tell her when I see her, which will be shortly. And you, missy,” he looked at Marget, “ I congratulate you on your father. The most stubborn man I have met, next to Drysdale. You see, I was right, Mr. Clergyman ! ” He turned to Mr. Shaw. “ You knew very well where these little sparklers were hidden. Yes, I

admit I was at my wits' end with you. Then it occurred to me you would tell your friends quickly enough where they were, though you wouldn't tell me. So I took steps to unite the happy family ! I saw yesterday I must leave rather in a hurry. This was my last throw. As a gambler I am a firm believer in the last throw." He tapped his pocket with a little swaggering gesture. " It has won."

" You can keep the filthy things," I spat out. " Proceeds of your beastly gun-running ! "

Geldart's eyebrows went up, and, smiling, he shook his head. " My dear Drysdale," he said, " you make a dreadful mistake. I am sorry to disabuse your mind, since you are so happy to part with them, but really the truth has been flying backwards and forwards so regularly, that I must correct the point. The stones have nothing to do with my little business at Black Edge that you have referred to so vulgarly. They were the proceeds of a perfectly legitimate transaction of Mr. Drysdale and myself in the Balkans before I came to Black Edge. It was an amusing experience. But perhaps I shall have the pleasure of telling you about it one day. Who knows ? "

He made as if to step back, and then his eyes suddenly narrowed. " Ah, friend Drysdale, in all this pleasant talk, I had nearly forgotten the score I have to pay you with. I liked you, I have said, but you killed my dog. I found its body yesterday, and saw the wound. To kill my dog is the unforgivable sin." As he spoke he was coming nearer to me, and the gun in his pocket was pointing towards my breast. " Put your hands up ! " he snarled, and suddenly, when he was close beside me, he sent his fist crashing into my face.

It caught me on the mouth, and sent me spinning backwards. I heard a cry from Marget, and by the time I picked myself up, Geldart was outside the door. He turned the key in the lock, slipped it into his pocket, and with

quiet sneering laughter swept off his broad-brimmed hat. Then he strolled downstairs humming softly to himself.

That scene had been so typical of the man—with his amazing mixture of bohemianism, braggadocio, and cruelty—that I was speechless. Mr. Shaw had dropped on a chair, and Marget and I stared at each other in silence. The girl was the first to move. She pushed open the casement. Geldart was running down the churchyard path to the road. Through the trees there was a flash of glass from the wind-screen of his car, and I saw that he was making eastward towards the coast. He had cut his escape very fine, but that again, I suppose, was typical. He did the dramatic, the showy thing instinctively.

"The last of Geldart," murmured Mr. Shaw, joining us at the window.

"I pray that it is," said Marget softly.

I rushed to the grille: it would have withstood an earthquake.

"What are you going to do, Ronny?" queried Marget anxiously as I ran to the window. I jumped up, threw a leg over the sill, and looked out.

"Give that hound a dashed good run for his money," I replied. "I must get out of here at once. . . . A fourteen foot drop on the porch roof! No good; I'd go through the tiles." Then I examined a ledge above. "I might swing myself up and get round to another window."

I think at that moment I would have done anything rather than suffer the tortures of inaction.

"Don't do it!" cried Marget. "The stones aren't worth risking your life for!"

"To blazes with the stones!" I said angrily. "I want to see that skunk Geldart with handcuffs on!" As I spoke I reached up to the ledge and got a grip, then paused.

"Hullo, who's that?"

A shout from down the churchyard made me turn my head. George and Jerry were strolling up the path smoking placidly.

"What are you doing?" called Jerry. "The Kirsty body at the Manse said you were all here."

"Get a rope!" I almost screamed at them. "Get a ladder! Anything to help me down. You've missed Geldart by five minutes! He's locked us in."

The pair of them goggled up at me, till the situation sank home.

Then Jerry went down the path like a rocket. He reappeared buckling together some thick straps I had seen on the luggage-carrier of his car, and he flung them up to me. I caught an end, fastened it round an iron peg that secured the window, and slid down on the porch roof. The next moment I was on the ground. There was a soft thud beside me, and Marget picked herself up from the grass, patting her hair.

"He made east," I said breathlessly. "Towards the coast. Five minutes' start—more. What do you think? Is it worth trying, George?"

"Five minutes' start, Jerry. What can you do about it?"

Jerry's eyes bulged. "Stop blethering!" he bellowed. "Ye're wasting time!" And he made for the road, with the three of us following. "I'm coming too!" panted Marget when we reached the car.

"Better out of it," said George quietly.

"Let the lassie come," sang out Jerry. "Goes better with four up." And the engine coughed and broke into a challenging roar, and the air was soon singing past our ears.

"Seymore was collared this morning at Liverpool," George shouted back to me from his seat beside Jerry in the front. "Instructions got through just in time. He was cutting for America."

"What about Forsyth?" I cupped my hands and asked him.

George shook his head. "Sitting tight, I suppose. He was in the know all right—paid well to keep his mouth shut, you bet. Seems not a bad old stick in a way. I'd see the man first before you do anything."

Jerry's brakes went on with a sickening jar, and we seemed to skid to a sudden stop alongside a dogcart.

"Aye, aye, turned up to the left. Going at an awful rate," was the leisurely answer to Jerry's quick questions, and we were off again with a shattering roar from the exhaust.

"Here!" I leant forward and shouted, as we soared past a side road on the left. "We've passed that turning."

Jerry nodded, grinning. "I know where that goes all right. Side road. Rotten surface. We'll get there quicker this way." Then I remembered that Jerry knew these roads better than the contours of his own fingers, and I lay back satisfied. We sang along till the telegraph posts seemed to flick past so quickly that they appeared part of a huge wire fence; and suddenly we swung north.

"We may meet him coming this way," Jerry called out. "Be ready."

"Wrong," he cried a few minutes later, as we passed a side road. "That's where he came out. Must be on ahead, so watch out."

For the second time on that breakneck journey, Jerry's brakes were clapped on with a jolt that pitched us forward.

"Car on roadside ahead!"

We drew up behind it and leapt out. There was not a soul to be seen: only the empty car pulled up close to the ditch. A field and a low belt of bushes were between us and the sea. With a cry Jerry pointed to a vessel that lay out half a mile from the shore:

“ That his ship ? ”

George gave a shout of glee. Issuing swift instructions to Marget that she should remain beside the car, he led the way across the intervening field. In a few moments Jerry had forged on ahead with a pace that was amazing in one of his build. When George and I reached the bushes, he had disappeared, and we plunged after him.

By the time we emerged and reached the cliff top, Jerry had scrambled down a rocky path to the foot. He was lying flat on his face, popping off wildly with the huge revolver he had produced that morning at the inn.

Across the shingles to the water's edge raced Geldart, fifty yards away ; and drawing in to the shore was a little white boat. In the intervals of Jerry's revolver shots, I could hear its softly purring motor.

“ He's clear away ! ” groaned George. “ Just by the skin of his teeth. We'll never get him now ! ”

Even as he spoke Geldart stumbled, threw up his hands, and fell on his face.

Jerry had leapt to his feet and was rushing forward, shouting us on and waving his arms.

“ Jehoshaphat ! ” gasped George. “ The kid's winged him ! ”

Geldart had kicked and writhed for a moment, but now lay motionless. The motor boat had swung round and was making a bee-line for the steamer. With a shock of surprise I saw, at the tiller in the stern, the girl Thérèse ! Trust Geldart : he had had his arrangements all cut and dried. But for Jerry's chance bullet, he would have been by this time *en route* for the open seas and liberty.

“ Fainted,” cried Jerry as we ran up.

George stooped and examined the man. “ You've broken his leg with that blunderbuss,” he remarked quietly. “ We're going to have a job to get him up that cliff-path.”



While George knelt thoughtfully pondering the point, I was going through the unconscious man's pockets. I transferred the precious box and the key of the tower. A revolver I tossed over to George, who stuffed it away absent-mindedly.

"Look here, Jerry," he said, "you'd better run back to the road and stop the first car that passes. We'll need all the help we can get. I'm going up into that field to get a couple of bars from a gate, to rig up a stretcher to strap him on. It's the only way to get him up that I can see. You keep an eye on him, Ronny. Not that he'll come round for a while yet, and if he did he couldn't crawl two yards. You could be cutting a bit of that wood for a splint."

As the other two went up the path, I made along the shore about a hundred yards to the bushes he had pointed to. At last I found a straight piece of wood and got busy with my knife. A rhythmic whirr made me pause. I jumped to my feet, listened again, and rushed out into the open.

The motor boat had crept back inshore. I was just in time to see Geldart, a helpless mass, being picked up in the girl's arms as if he were an infant, and hoisted into the stern of the boat. She was over the knees in the water, and with a leap she followed her burden. There was a splutter of foam, and the motor boat was racing over the breakers heading full speed for the steamer in the offing.

I shouted and ran, but it was too late. The last I saw of the motor boat, before the shore breakers closed it off from my sight, was a little white handkerchief quickly fluttered in the breeze.

"Take them. They're yours," I said.

Jerry and George, in the front seat of the car, were deep

in some discussion, as we raced joyfully for home, while Marget and I occupied the back.

"They're not," snapped Marget. "I've told you that before. They're *your* property."

"Right," I replied. "That's the end of it. They're mine. When I now ask you to accept them as a little gift from me, have you the heart to refuse?"

"Certainly," said Marget crisply. "I won't hear of it."

I moved a little nearer to her on the seat. "Here's a good idea. Why not take them, so as to make you independent, in case you get a beastly selfish stubborn bad-tempered brute of a husband who ill-treats you? It sometimes happens, you know."

"Oh, he's not so bad as all that," said Marget, with a little happy laugh, as she nestled close and lifted up her lips.



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